

ヴァンパイア

成田良悟

Ryohgo Narita

IV!



[My sincerest apologies for the wait, ladies and gentlemen! It has been much too long. Ah, in the spirit of cordial relations, allow me to tell you a tale about the relationships between vampires and humans.]

[There was, you see, a mass disappearance in Southern Germany. Our Organization called a meeting to discuss the incident, but at the same time, Michael left the island of Growerth with some resolution in mind! Naturally, my daughter Ferret followed after him to the mainland... If only it had ended up a mere bittersweet elopement between two young people...]

[What will come of the relationship between this human-vampire couple? Tragedy? Or romance? I truly look forward to seeing what you think of this long, long tale that stretches on even to this very day.]



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[Now, let me introduce today those who are often at my side.]

[At this point, I believe there is no particular need for me to introduce Relic and Ferret to you, my friends. But as Relic has recently succeeded me as Lord of Growerth, he has been burdened with many more responsibilities. But I have faith that the maids who play many indispensable roles in the castle will assist him.]

[Some among the maids are witches, but most are vampires known as *baobhan sith*. They use the color green as their trademark, and often work in teams of four, as per some rule by which they abide. Initially, there were only eight serving in the castle. But before I knew it, there were over twenty *baobhan sith* in the castle's service. I could scarcely hide my shock.]

[My predecessor, though human, was beloved by nonhumans. In that sense, Michael Dietrich is very much like my father.]

[But in any event, there is much to be learned from these wonderful vampires. I ask that you forgive their impudence—if that is how they strike you—and treat them with grace.]

[...Of course, as there is no official contract binding their terms of employment, I couldn't fire them even if I wanted to.]



[I presume there is no particular need for me to speak at length about the officers of the Organization.]

[There are many colorful characters in the Organization, and it is often the case that the more distinctive vampires tend to possess great power in proportion. Of course, there are some exceptions.]

[To digress, beings whose powers distance them from death cannot maintain a sense of self without also being possessed of such idiosyncrasies. Eternity, after all, is a poison that slowly eats away at the heart.]

[...It seems to me that these vampires are, in fact, addicted to this poison—and I am no exception.]



[What do I think of humans, you ask? I recall discussing my opinions on romance in the past, but are you asking for more specific thoughts on our relationship?]

[Ah, the gap between humans and vampires is not a significantly large one. But depending on the era, it can *deepen* unfathomably. One could easily make the leap across, so long as one is filled with determination. But it would be a difficult task indeed to try and fill that gap. And those who attempt to make the crossing without sufficient resolve will find themselves falling into an endless abyss.]

[Not only have we vampires been turned into symbols of evil in the history of humanity, there are also many of us who behave in ways that only affirm that belief. As a result, even humans who attempt to grow closer to vampires are sometimes pushed into that abyss at the hands of fellow humans.]



[But the same also applies for vampires. Even those who pose no harm to humans are treated as devils, executed for being a so-called sinful existence. It is no wonder that so few vampires attempt to make that crossing over the gap between these two species.]

[And what of me, you ask? I have no particular intention of making that leap. Humans and vampires must both live by their own ways. We cannot so easily force a co-existence, either allowing vampires to drink blood wantonly or forbidding the act entirely. I suppose... yes. What I wish is not to cross the gap between humans and vampires, but to fill it, little by little. So that one day, if someone should fall into that gap, they could at least climb back to where they had been before.]

[The most important thing about time is the way one uses it. Time, on occasion, will solve one's problems. But on other occasions, it will only worsen them. Sentiments between those of different species or those of the same species, be they love or hatred, can sometimes be strengthened by time. But at other times, it can distort their sentiments unrecognizably.]



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Extra Episode A: Vampires and Humans

Somewhere in Japan. The words of an anthropologist.

Vampires?

Are you asking me about vampires? Me, a countryside scholar who's never published a single book on the subject?

I won't mince words. Please drop this idea.

Seeing as you mentioned the topic to me, I suppose you must be in the know. But it's best that you keep your nose out of this business as much as you can.

If it's immortality you seek, there surely must be a better method.

If it's power you want, it might not be a bad idea to join the military or become a mercenary to strengthen yourself. Or I would recommend you enter politics or commerce, so you could take hold of political or financial power.

...Oh. So it was just curiosity?

Hm.

I'd still advise you to keep away from this business, but... I'll answer your questions. Although I can't say just how much my meagre knowledge could help you.

...Ah, yes.

You want to know about the relationship between humans and vampires.

The answer to that is at once complex and simple.

That is because, put in extreme terms, 'case-by-case' is the only way to put it.

What are humans to vampires?

Beings deserving of love?

Creatures lagging behind the process of evolution?

Demons who drive stakes through their hearts in a bid for extermination?

Or are they simply prey?

What are vampires to humans?

Are they simply monsters?

Pitiful neighbors who cannot even die?

Exalted myth and immortality in the flesh?

Or are they useful tools?

There are countless answers to these questions; a different answer for each perspective and bias.

Bias, you see, is generally born from the loudest voice.

A vampire crying, "Give me blood", or "You are nothing more than prey".

A human crying, "They're monsters", or "If we don't kill them, they'll kill us".

An agitator's potency is in large part determined by the volume of their voice. After all, they are the ones who deeply engrain the roots of ideology into the thoughts of those who never once paid mind to such things.

Of course, indoctrination of ideology aside, witnessing creatures like vampires is generally enough to rob one of all reason or thought.

The sight of a vampire sinking its fangs into a human's neck to suck their blood.

Seeing such a scene may very well instantly turn reverence for these mythical beings into fear.

Or, perhaps, the sight of a vampire soaring through the air, elegantly living out its eternal life.

Seeing such a scene may very well turn even the most adamant of hatred into something like this.

'If only we could be immortal, too!'

In other words, the relationships between humans and vampires is flexible. It can change depending on the era and the situation. And as so many are capable of communicating flawlessly with humans, we can't even place them into a simple food chain.

I'd go so far as to say that this is a sensitive issue—one that rivals discourse concerning the relationships between nations, peoples, and religions.

Of course, these days, a vast majority of humans are afraid of vampires.

At this point, humans treat vampires as terrifying monsters. Of course, if vampires were to come out in the open and it turned out that the cure to cancer lay in their cells, humans' opinion of them might do an immediate about-face. It just unfortunately happens to be the case that they have been feared by humans from ages past.

Perhaps the only ones who do not fear vampires are fanatical worshippers, or those who have been enraptured by portrayals in Hollywood films and Japanese animation.

Now, according to statistics that only matter to us—people who mutually acknowledge the existence of vampires—

At present, there are at least fifty thousand vampires living on the Earth. Of course, we have no way of knowing if extraterrestrials, and extraterrestrial vampires exist. On that note, have you ever heard of a movie called 'Space Vampire'?

Excuse me. I digress. In any case, there are no less than fifty thousand 'Others' inhabiting this planet alongside us.

Does that seem like a large number to you? But let's put this into perspective. Fifty thousand is less than 0.001 percent of the human population. Less than one in a hundred thousand. There are over twelve million humans squirming around the city of Tokyo alone. Fifty thousand is not a large number. And that number drops dramatically when one narrows down the list to vampires that are capable of defeating a hundred thousand humans singlehandedly.

From the vampire's perspective, it is a terrifying situation.

For each vampire, there are a hundred thousand hostile beings with the power to destroy them.

Perhaps the less powerful vampires are living out the story of the protagonist in a zombie movie.

...Does this surprise you?

Aren't humans just prey to vampires, you ask?

Why does Superman have to fear a horde of zombies, you wonder?

Your questions aren't without their merits, but... Ah, have you ever heard of an American comic book series called 'Marvel Zombies'? ...Excuse me. I digress.

Let's talk about the sea.

Did you know that dolphins hunt sharks in schools?

Of course, they don't hunt sharks for food, but for their own safety.

If vampires are creatures who think nothing of killing us and sucking our blood, then they are like the sharks.

Creatures at the very top of the food chain.

Now, we humans are creatures that look similar to the sharks, but are completely different—the dolphins.

Dolphins hunt sharks through teamwork.

Whether you believe me or not is up to you.

One dolphin lures out a shark, acting as bait. Then other dolphins sneak in from the side and tear at the shark's belly with their sharp beaks.

Yes. Just like white stakes.

Some of the bravest and fiercest among humans are less like dolphins and more like orcas. Vampires seem to call them 'Eaters'.

In any case, the dolphins have countless methods of killing the sharks.

Then, what must the sharks—the vampires—do?

If things continue, even harmless sharks that feed only on plankton would fall prey to orcas.

Thinking over the issue, they reached a certain conclusion.

'Couldn't we also band together?'

It's very simple.

The vampires created an alliance.

To make it easier for them to live on in this world.

Broadly speaking, there are currently three kinds of vampires.

The first are rabble who act alone, or in small groups.

The second are 'family' centered around Clans. As far as we know, there are seven vampire Clans in the world. One even exists in Japan, but in any case, each Clan is quite small. Think of them as 'aristocrat vampires' you see in movies and books.

And as for the third and final category... This is the large-scale Organization I'm about to describe to you.

The Organization has no other name. According to a member I spoke with in person,

"I'm not really sure, but I heard that when everyone came up with suggestions for a name and held a meeting over the issue, the Organization nearly fell apart."

...is what this vampire told me.

Hm? Oh, yes. That vampire seems to be an officer, but he's... a good person. Someone who treats humans like me with kindness. Yes. A good man. So kind that he suffers from a digestive disorder. You might wonder if being sick is even possible for vampires, but such kinds do indeed exist. After all, vampires are an incredibly varied and diverse species.

Now, this vampire doesn't seem to understand just how influential his position as an officer really is.

After all, members of the Organization number at twenty thousand, and there are about three hundred officers.

Just how did they gather such numbers, when there were only twenty or so members at its founding...?

Does an Organization of twenty thousand vampires sound threatening to you?

But don't think of the Organization as an army. It's actually much closer to a social club.

Do you know the number of people in Japan who take part in organized crime?

Did you know that there are over two hundred and fifty thousand police officers in Japan alone?

How do things seem in perspective? Twenty thousand isn't much more than the number of students at a decent university.

And it would be a lie to say the Organization is, in any way, prone to unity.

In fact, it's a good day if a fight doesn't break out at all among the members.

Vampires, you see, are highly individualistic. Each individual comes from different places, has different families, and professes to different faiths.

Of course, some of them possess a magnetic sort of character that draws in followers around them.

So how is the Organization doing now?

Even I don't have all the details, so I can't give you an informative answer. But if I had to say...

...Pandemonium itself, I'd wager.

Prologue: Vampires...?

Southern Germany.

There was a peaceful village nestled in the mountainside.

The little settlement, far away from any large city, was a tranquil place home to about fifty villagers.

There was no cell phone signal, let alone telephone service. At most they had access to electric generators and TV signals.

There were no newspapers, cars, or paved paths good enough for bicycles.

It was a world far from those who disliked walking and climbing. It was essentially a landlocked island.

But the young people of the village did not pack up and leave for the city. There was a good balance of age groups, with about ten or so of both children and elders.

But calamity came to that little village.

There was no sign and no prelude to the incident.

But it was undeniably an eerie calamity, one that sent stubborn ripples into the world at large.

The main mode of communication in that village was the postal system.

That was why the postman was first to notice the calamity.

He started from the city at the foot of the mountain, traveling for three hours to collect and deliver mail.

It had been three years since he first began that route.

When he had first taken over, he was, to be perfectly honest, a little angry at the village.

The day before he began the route, he had even gone drinking with his co-worker and complained, *"Those villagers should just move to the city or something"*.

But the man had quickly found himself ashamed of what he said.

The moment he arrived at the village with his predecessor, his impression of the settlement had done an about-face.

The villagers, with their warm smiles, had surrounded him and showered him with gratitude—as though he had saved their lives, even though all he did was deliver the mail.

They had tearfully seen off his predecessor for the last time, and had welcomed the new postman like family.

From then on, he became the bridge between the village and the outside world.

Children crowded around him and giggled excitedly at the letters he brought, alongside the adults.

The heartwarming sight energized him. He didn't even feel tired climbing the mountain once a week.

But when he arrived this time, just as he usually did, the calamity had already begun.

He could not hear their voices.

Normally, he would hear the sound of children's voices as they chattered and screamed in the village square.

But even after stepping through the village entrance, he did not hear them. In fact, he didn't hear the many sounds that usually came with the presence of people.

Fear began to loom over his heart.

At first, it was trepidation. Then, confusion and terror and trepidation again.

His emotions cycled through and snowballed, and eventually his trepidation grew so intense that he ended up screaming,

"I-is anyone here?!"

But his cry only confirmed his fears.

The village was exactly as he had left it a week ago.

The ball the children played with was lying in a corner of the square. The basketball net set up in front of a stone house creaked in the mountain winds.

But they were gone.

Every last one of them. The villagers were gone.

After the trepidation came sadness.

He did not know why they had disappeared.

He did not know if they were even alive.

Maybe everyone had simply gone herb-picking together.

But no reason could hold back the sadness welling up inside.

The people who should have been there were not.

The voices that he should have heard were gone.

Those two simple facts turned into a powerful sense of loss that engulfed his thoughts.

The postman desperately searched through the village, trying to see if anyone was there.

And as he began to surrender, let down by the total stillness,

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something moving.

The moment he spotted the figure, his mind went blank.

It was one of the stone houses in the village.

The old wicket gate opened, and emerged—

A terrified little girl. One he had seen often in the village.

"Mr. Postman...?"

The pigtailed girl, her face streaked with tears, ran up to the familiar postman and clung to his leg, sobbing.

Several days later, the incident made headlines in the newspapers.

The surviving girl testified that the village had been attacked, and the cluttered state of several houses added credibility to her claim.

But the fact that fifty people disappeared overnight, without leaving so much as a drop of blood, led people to murmur that this was, perhaps, not the work of humans.

They were abducted by aliens.

They were sucked through a tear in space-time.

They committed mass suicide.

They were attacked by people living in a fantastic underground world.

Baseless rumors like 'There was a half-drunk cup of coffee and a smoking cigarette left behind' began to surface, giving way to even more morbid curiosity that led to the incident being labeled by some as a 'Modern-Day Mary Celeste'.

Not only that, some humans began to hypothesize,

Perhaps this was the work of vampires.

But that rumor alone had some basis in fact.

The fact was never revealed to the media, but so believable was the rumor that it spread even to other countries.

The fact was that on the neck of the lone survivor were two little marks. Two round marks, as though something had sunk its fangs into her.

Chapter 1: Invitations for the Vampires

Put simply, the call was an extraordinarily brief one.

[I propose a meeting. All available Colors, gather at the Mars family's country house in Southern Germany at midnight local time on the final day of the month.

-Gerhardt von Waldstein]

There was nothing else.

But the words were translated into countless languages and spread across the Earth through all sorts of media.

Of course, the message was not broadcast to the people of the world like a television show.

Only about one hundred individuals were in receipt of the call.

The group went beyond simple diversity. The members were of different backgrounds and languages—those who comprised the group had absolutely nothing to do with each other.

From a human perspective, that is.

Those who were called had one thing in common. One simple but decisive factor.

They were vampires.

Most of those who received the message had not only surpassed the bounds of humanity, they also ignored even the laws of physics that governed the world.

To cite a more specific commonality, the individuals were fellow officers of an Organization of vampires.

Of the individuals, said to be the most powerful of vampires, many had laid their roots deep into human society and beyond.

In other words, they were everywhere and anywhere.

No different from humans.

†

The United States of America. Somewhere in Chicago.

"An excellent view, wouldn't you agree?"

The voice of the man facing the window was deep and resonant, but his enunciation was clear to those in the room.

They were in one of the many skyscrapers in the city of Chicago.

This particular room seemed to be on a very high floor. The night sky outside the window was filled with stars.

Dots of light lining the skies, and countless electric lights scattered across the earth.

The glow of the city was just beginning to overpower the glow of the heavens. And in this room at the boundary of the two spaces, a man quietly muttered,

"But there's one flaw in this excellent view. Nebula's Mist Babel, the only obstacle to my own building's supremacy. Hmph... But I suppose that can't be helped. The moneyed must be modest. If nothing else, our total assets are greater than Nebula's—and I have to acknowledge the Mist Babel for the debt I owe to their chairman from five generations ago."

The man's eyes were fixed upon the headquarters of the multinational corporation known as 'Nebula'.

With his gaze on the great white tower that stood proudly over Chicago, the man chuckled and tilted the wineglass in his hand.

From the position of the room, his building was probably one of the greats as well. The carpet covering the floor was mainly of primary colors, but there was not a hint of frivolity in its design. It was as though a chunk of floor had been carved out of a royal palace and transported there.

The carpet was not the only thing that fit that description. The little round tables, the lights on the walls and ceilings, and even the pillars were showy yet majestic.

The room was straight out of the manor of a baroque-era aristocrat, or a high-class restaurant.

And since the space was, in fact, a dining room owned by a man of great wealth, neither comparison was very far from the truth.

The man stood before one of the windows in this room—to be specific, he was standing in front of the wall, which was made of tempered glass. And without even turning around, he addressed the space behind himself.

"Setting aside that one blemish... The view at night is simply splendid. The world only truly shines after darkness falls. Wouldn't you agree?"

"..."

He heard no answer.

Behind the man, in the middle of the room, was a younger man whose hands were tied behind his back. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, with a slight beard on his face. Droplets of blood were scattered across his brown coat, and his face was also covered with his own blood.

"Now... let me ask you again. Why did you make an attempt on my life?"

With the disturbing question, the man at the window slowly turned around.

His bright blond hair was neatly combed back. He showed no sign of disconcertment before the one who had supposedly attempted to kill him.

The blond man was probably in his early forties. Although his physical movements made him look a little more youthful than that, there was something in his mannerisms that suggested great maturity behind him.

And at the man of ambiguous age came a voice filled with pure hatred.

"...You wanna know *why*? I thought you had me dragged here 'cause you already knew."

The young man in the coat made no attempt to hide his loathing, rage, and most of all, his disgust.

"Hm. I can't argue that my life has been threatened more times than there are stars in the sky. But let me clear up this misunderstanding. My *family* are the ones who control the Gardastance Group today. All I have to my name is power and influence that lets me use money like water. So if your business, or some equivalent thereof, lost out to our—"

"Cut the crap, *vampire*!"

A vampire.

It was a strangely unscientific statement for a man in the middle of a modern city. The blond man, however, was unfazed.

"Yes. I am a vampire. And?"

His answer was incredibly nonchalant. The young man in the coat ground his teeth.

"That's reason enough for me to kill you!"

With a look at the young man's expression—which was spiteful enough to be reserved for the devil himself—the blond vampire put on a curious look and fell into thought. He soon opened his mouth once more.

"I was being quite serious when I asked for your motives earlier. I honestly don't know what you are trying to say. So let me ask... why did you try to kill me?"

"Wha-"

"I looked into your background. You have no religious affiliation, and though I considered that you might be a freelance Hunter, I still found no reason why I should be threatened. It's not as though I've ever kidnapped some innocent village girl. In this world, I can use money to get myself the loveliest of women. And if I couldn't earn her love with *money*, no vampiric power would be enough to sway her to me. I'm not so arrogant as to assume that love can be *purchased*."

After his rather calm and proud declaration, the vampire continued,

"Perhaps you have me confused with another vampire. After all, combed-back blond hair isn't all that uncommon among our kind. Perhaps it's the influence of cinema..."

"Don't mess with me!" The restrained Hunter cried, cutting off the vampire, "what's the difference? You're all the same! You deserve to die *because* you're a vampire!"

"Ah! Now I understand."

The vampire on the receiving end of the young man's threats nodded, and dramatically spread his arms. He elegantly looked down upon the human.

"To think I would be placed under threat for so outdated a reason! Of course. Of course! What a curious day. I'd heard Gerhardt was visited by rabble like this in the past, but now I've got myself a wonderful story to tell the others!"

"...Outdated'?"

"One can't argue that the idea of vampires being servants to the devil is a bygone thought. Don't you agree that one must first do some *research* before setting out to eliminate something? The idea of killing vampires for no reason other than their existence, in this day and age, is nonsense. Of course, some sects do indeed give us a fair chance and study about us before declaring us enemies and attacking."

The vampire shrugged and addressed the back of the room.

"So, how does it feel to have been hindered? Not by vampires, but *humans*?"

"...Never thought so many people'd sell their souls to the devil."

The Hunter spat hatefully, slowly turning his focus to the area behind himself.

There were more than just the two of them on that floor.

Dozens of men in military jackets were standing in a row behind the bound Hunter.

In fact, the halls on this floor and many other places throughout the building were guarded by 'private soldiers' who were dressed, not in army jackets, but security uniforms.

The soldiers were dead silent. No emotion showed on their faces.

But as though speaking on their behalf, the vampire continued scornfully.

"Devils? Souls? That's what's so outdated about your claims. I demand labor from these people, which they supply me with. And I compensate them. I also pay them money to keep secret the fact that I am a vampire. After all, there are countless people who are more desperate for immediate reward than eternal life."

"..."

"I must admit, it was rather interesting to talk with such an old-fashioned Hunter like yourself. While you await trial, why not take your time figuring out a way to explain why you were carrying around a weapon as strange as a white stake?"

The vampire turned away, having lost interest. The Hunter frowned and asked,

"...You're not going to kill me?"

"I have no reason to. But let me give you a piece of advice. The one you should truly fear isn't the vampire. It's the capitalist. Remember. I have the power to frame you for falsified crimes and put you away in prison for all eternity."

With his composed, condescending words, the vampire put on a self-deprecating smile and put an end to the conversation.

"The most terrifying thing in the world? It's not vampires. It's money."

He began walking, past the young man. And at that very moment,

"That so...?"

The Hunter grinned maniacally.

"Then die."

He had, at some point, untied his restraints. The Hunter leapt into the air with great force, charging toward the vampire. And in his hand was a very thin stake of carved wood he had drawn from somewhere.

"?!"

But before the nearest soldier could react,

Before the blond vampire could even turn to face the Hunter,

Before even the sound of the young man leaping into the air,

The Hunter reached out to kill the vampire at positively inhuman speeds.

He reached out.

Further,

Further and further,

Further and further and further still.

Completely ignoring what the vampire had to say, the young man became a mass of determination that existed for the sole purpose of destruction.

His one attack was filled with resolve and purpose, flying like a bullet toward his target.

But the attack would never reach the vampire's heart.

"Wha..."

To the young man's shock, the object that blocked his wooden stake was something all too familiar to him.

Paper.

His determined attack had been blocked by a mass of hundred-dollar bills.

Where in the world had they come from?

It was a pile of wealth itself, composed of hundreds, thousands, or perhaps tens of thousands of bills.

Hundred-dollar bills, which were sure to be worth a fortune if tallied together, had flown and squirmed and twisted together as though possessed of minds of their own. They had become a paper shield that stopped the Hunter's stake.

A real bullet, perhaps, would have been able to pierce the symbol of capitalism. But reinforcing the barrier of papers was a wall of metal composed of countless coins.

From behind the absolute wall of capitalism, the vampire said sympathetically,

"Impressive speed. For a human, anyway."

In a corner of the wall of money, the vampire grinned, just as the Hunter had done moments earlier.

"Here's your tip."

A second later, the bills threw themselves upon the Hunter at once, robbing his limbs of movement.

Then, the vampire reached into his pocket and took out a wallet. He took out a single coin and flicked it toward the Hunter.

It was an innocuous action, but no one had been able to catch the movement of his fingers.

By the time they heard the sound of metal cutting through air, it was already over.

"..."

The Hunter fainted without so much as a groan, the whites of his eyes exposed.

Lodged in his chest was a coin that had been driven into him at incredible speed.

The blond vampire fixed his collar and flashed the unconscious young man one final, arrogant smile.

"Remember. This is capitalism."

Once the Hunter had been taken away by the police, the vampire—Rude Gardastance—stepped onto an elevator alongside his secretary, who had been waiting in the hallway.

Rude addressed the secretary with utter calm, as though the attempt on his life had been a thing of the distant past.

"Any interesting news?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Waldstein has just called for a conference."

As she gave her report, the secretary opened up a PDA and held it out to Rude.

The moment Rude read through the contents of the email, the calm on his face gave way to an uncomfortable frown.

"The end of the month... Do I have anything scheduled?"

"Yes, sir. Dinner with Senator Sturm and a large banquet."

At the secretary's answer, Rude breathed a joyous sigh of relief and shut the PDA with a laugh, handing it back to her.

"Trifles. Cancel those engagements. Even my banquet will only be host to humans. It's not reason enough to turn down Gerhardt's invitation."

"Is this all right, sir?"

"Of course. Those humans are only moneyed hordes who seek eternal life. Dropping by the Organization's meeting will be a much more profitable use of my time."

"From the word 'available' on the email, I don't believe it's a very important meeting, sir..." The secretary said, just in case.

Rude looked up at the ceiling of the elevator with a haughty smile, and spoke in an appropriately proud tone.

"I don't need to remind you; I have money. More money than *anyone* in the world."

"Are you trying to be arrogant, sir?" The secretary asked emotionlessly. Rude ignored her question, and allowed his expression to soften ever-so-slightly.

"That's why I know better than anyone the value of those who can't be bought with money.

"In other words, that is the worth of the Organization to us vampires."

†

Just as Rude had received the message,

Many other vampires all over the world heard the call.

Through email, letters, telephone, morse code, signal fire, or telepathy.

All kinds of means were used to invite all kinds of vampires from all kinds of locations.

One, in an ancient castle in Eastern Europe.

One, on the grounds of a shrine.

One, on a city crossroads.

One, in front of the computer at home.

One, on the high seas.

One, under the waves.

One, in the back of a cavern.

One, atop a gigantic spiderweb in an abandoned house.

One, in a pet store.

One, in an arcade.

One, on the front lines of battle.

One, inside a crib.

One, inside a grave.

One, in digital space.

One, beyond the stars.

One, in the midst of biting a human.

One, in the midst of being bitten by a mosquito.

One, in the midst of a 100-million dollar gamble at a casino.

One, in the midst of sleeping with a human woman.

One, in the midst of puzzling out a crime.

One, in the midst of doing maintenance on his own body.

One, in the midst of repenting at a church.

One, in the midst of taking digestive medicine.

One, in the midst of getting a tan on the beach.

One, in the midst of defusing a bomb.

One, in the midst of urinating on a utility pole.

One, in the midst of a dentist's appointment.

One, in the midst of being attacked by a Hunter.

One, in the midst of helping a friend about to be attacked by a Hunter.

One, in the midst of threatening a friend under the guise of a Hunter.

In all kinds of times, places, and situations, the vampires received the message.

Their dead hearts began to beat with excitement at Gerhardt's sudden call.

†

The former chairman of the Gardastance Group—a multinational corporation counted among the top ten companies in the United States of America—flaunted his freedom and wealth without restraint.

"The Mars family's vacation home. If I remember correctly, they have a helipad."

"Yes, sir. They have eight set aside for guest use."

"...I see."

The vampire fell into thought for a moment. He gravely looked at the secretary and came up with a proposal.

"What do you think of this plan? Arrive on scene with a purchased military helicopter while madly opening fire with a paint gun?"

"It's an affordable plan, sir, but for the sake of my mental health I would like to ask you to refrain." The secretary answered emotionlessly.

Seeing the visible twitch in the woman's temples, the richest vampire in the world broke into cold sweat. He averted his gaze and began to brainstorm ideas for the gift he would bring to the meeting.

†

A home on the island of Growerth.

"I'm broke..."

The boy was looking back and forth at his wallet and his passbook, mumbling to himself in despair.

"Oh no... What do I do...? Now I can't buy Ferret a gift."

His name was Michael Dietrich.

He was an exceedingly normal young man living in rural Germany.

In age, he was quite close to becoming an adult. But the air of innocence around him made him seem rather childlike still.

Among the many types of secondary education offered in Germany, Michael was old enough to be entering a vocational school. But thanks to certain circumstances on Growerth, he was currently undergoing training related to the various tourism-related businesses on the island.

Immediately after his studies, he would be conscripted. There was a busy plan laid out before him, but at this point, all he was concerned about was the fanciful dream of creating children's books and starting a family with the girl he loved. A complete rejection of reality.

The girl he loved, of course, never returned his affections. And even if she did, there were still countless obstacles standing in their way.

But what bothered him now was none of these obstacles, but the reality of the fact that he was too poor to buy her a gift.

It occurred to him that money was not necessary for a gift, but he was in no state to make her a present himself. And he had also experienced over a hundred instances of writing love letters(which were cost-free) and having them all torn apart or thrown away.

At this point, the girl could probably report Michael for being a stalker. But fortunately, she had a good reason for being unable to turn to the police.

This reason was connected to the obstacles that stood in their way.

In terms of both social class and position, they were at opposite ends of the spectrum.

He was an ordinary commoner.

She was an aristocrat's daughter, living in a castle.

He was a human being.

She was a vampire.

Ferret von Waldstein.

It had been many years since she stole Michael's heart.

To this very day, he continued to shower her with affection.

But there was nothing but trouble in his way.

Each whisper of love earned him a punch.

Each love letter was tossed away on the spot.

His parents were in staunch opposition.

His parents hired Hunters to kill the vampire girl.

He was pierced with a stake by another Hunter who attacked her. And for a time, Michael had been in the hospital in critical condition.

And yet he did not give up.

Ferret had been looking quite down lately. So in order to live out his affections, Michael made up his mind to give her a gift. But sadly, his purchasing power was currently a resounding zero.

"I guess I'd better find a part-time job."

In Germany, earnings from part-time jobs were subject to taxation. And the number of unemployed was by no means small. There was no guarantee that Michael would find employment.

He had tried to get an interview at several places, but certain circumstances prevented him from being hired.

"That's all right! As long as I have Ferret's love, things'll work out somehow... Come to think of it, didn't Doctor say before that he was recruiting test subjects? ...I wonder if he needs any humans."

Michael slapped his knee with his left hand. He got to his feet and immediately ran for the door.

Not knowing who, or what strange fate awaited before him.

Of course, even if he knew, Michael would not hesitate to step forward.

†

Several days later. Waldstein Castle, on the island of Growerth.

Growerth was a large island in the North Sea, under the jurisdiction of Germany.

Not only was it a prominently large island, it was also under development as a tourist destination. It was also actively establishing sister cities overseas in countries like Japan, America, and Australia.

Including Neuberg, several cities were on the island, upon which were everything from streets resembling the Middle Ages to modern-day civic centers and hotels. Of course, there were no skyscrapers on the island—five-story hotels were about as tall as they went. And yet not a single room was vacant during the busy tourist season. Old buildings by the large streets that had been renovated into hotels were also quite popular with visitors. In more recent years, the annual festival had become such a success that plans for a large-scale hotel were currently under consideration. Local opinion on the development was still mixed.

Many small peaks rose up near the center of the island, covered with deciduous trees. And near the top of a peak on the southern side of the island was a large castle taken straight out of the Middle Ages. Waldstein Castle, the symbol of Growerth and one of its most popular tourist destinations.

Its majestic beauty harmoniously blended with the viridian forests and mountains. Countless visitors lost themselves in the wondrous sights as they stepped into the storybook setting.

Thanks to the fact that many works of art by Growerth's very own Carnald Strassburg were displayed on the premises, Waldstein Castle was considered the most prominent sightseeing destination on the island known for its rich culture.

But most people had no idea.

Deep within the castle, there was a residential area hidden from the public's view.

But what lived inside was not human.

In the majestic and elegant castle resided its lord, living in death from behind the veils of darkness.

The vampire known as Relic von Waldstein, and others who belonged to the world of the Night.

But the Master of Night, ruler of Growerth, was currently looking just about ready to cry in the face of his younger sister's rage.

†

Evening, Waldstein Castle dining hall.

"Honored Brother! Just how many times must I remind you?!"

A boy flinched at the outraged voice.

"C'mon, Ferret. You don't have to get that angry. I almost dropped my plate."

"I am angry at you because you deserved the show of indignation! Honored Brother, you are the master of this castle and the Lord of Growerth! So what possessed you to personally take your finished plate to the sink?!"

As Ferret chastised him, Relic—the older twin—sighed uncomfortably.

It was one in the morning.

Relic and Ferret were vampires, but they did not have to live on blood alone. Although some vampires were able to consume nothing else, the twins were capable of also enjoying ordinary meals as human beings did.

Around them stood a row of maids in green clothing, watching over them as though the scene warmed their hearts. Ferret, however, did not seem to notice as she directed her outrage at Relic.

"But it's faster for me to just take the plate myself..."

"This is not a matter of efficiency! Honored Brother, you must come to a better understanding of your own noble status! There is a place for commoners, and there is a place for aristocrats. Is it so difficult for you to see that this boundary must not be crossed?!"

The girl was wearing a completely black, but elegant dress. Her outfit alone made her seem far removed from mere humans or the mundane world.

Meanwhile, the boy was wearing clothing any young man in the city might wear. He carried himself with a completely different air from his sister.

"I think I told you this before, but... I mean, sure, I inherited the island from Father. But I don't really want to act like... you know..."

"Hmph!"

As Relic trailed off vaguely, Ferret decided to turn her rage to the maids around them. However, she was slightly more reserved when speaking to them. The venom with which she berated her brother had been softened.

"A-and all of you, as well! Why did you not try to stop Honored Brother when he attempted to take away his plate personally?!"

"If I may, Miss Ferret..." One of the maids said with a curtsy. "Master Relic is the current Lord of Waldstein Castle and the one whose orders we must prioritize over all others. We also advised him on this very matter once, but Master Relic answered with a smile that he would prefer to take his plates himself. We were only following his orders."

"..."

Having been the one to bring up hierarchy in the first place, Ferret could not find a response. Seeing his chance, Relic joined the conversation.

"Yeah, Ferret. Don't blame the maids."

"H-Honored Brother!"

But what Relic did not take into account was the fact that the maids also served Ferret as their mistress. The one who had answered Ferret turned to Relic with a deep bow.

"If I may, Master Relic, I wish to advise you once more."

"Yes?"

"Trifling things like taking away the plates are jobs that we have been assigned and have accepted as our own. So unless it is an act derived of great determination or joy, we would be grateful if you allowed us to continue with the work we were assigned."

"..."

This time, Relic was the one lost for a response. He looked at the maid, at his sister, and back at the maid again. And eventually, he sighed in defeat and gently laid down his plate.

"I'm sorry. It looks like I still have a long way to go before I become a good master to everyone."

At Relic's sincere apology, the maids bowed all together.

A maid who was standing beside Ferret whispered to her,

"If I may advise you, Miss Ferret. Anger is not a very effective tool for chiding Master Relic."

"...!"

"After all, he could dismiss even the wisest piece of advice as a mere emotional outburst."

"...I understand." Ferret answered, sighing just as her brother had. The maid smiled gently and said in a rather casual tone for a servant,

"It looks like you owe me one, Miss Ferret."

"Ohh..."

Were the maids anyone else, Ferret might have lashed out at them for their insolence. But she could not bring herself to show such indignation to the maids, who were like mothers to them. Ferret had been, for a moment, uncomfortable at being in debt to the maid. But when the maid herself pointed that out in good humor, Ferret found herself feeling more at ease.

Remembering the fact that even her adoptive father Gerhardt, the former Lord of Waldstein Castle, could not argue with the maids, Ferret once more remembered their underlying influence.

"Allow us to serve you some tea." One of the maids said. Soon, the maids began to gracefully clear the table. Relic could not take his eyes off the sight. And before he knew it, the plates and utensils were gone. The remnants of their meal had been cleared from the elegant tablecloth, giving way to an air of relaxation.

"Er, thank you."

'They're really amazing, no matter how many times I see them work.'

Although Relic saw the maids use their incredible skills every day, he was constantly floored by their expertise.

And each time he watched them, the same question bugged him:

'Do I really deserve to call myself their master?'

It was not only the maids.

This island was home to countless supernatural creatures, including vampires and werewolves. Under the protection of Waldstein Castle, they lived out their own lifestyles alongside—or separately from—humans.

The Lord of Waldstein Castle meant nothing to the humans of Growerth. But for those like Relic—those humans saw as 'Others'—his position was a very meaningful one.

Did he really have what it took to claim such a role, Relic wondered.

Although his doubt continued, he had already accepted his position. He could not allow his trepidation to become a weakness.

Thus, Relic looked at his own position head-on.

At the same time, there was something that bothered him slightly about his sister.

"Say, Ferret?"

"Yes, Honored Brother?"

Their argument had only just come to a close. Ferret was still sounding somewhat cold.

But Relic's question turned the air around her upside-down.

"Why don't you go hang out with Michael once in a while?"

"Pardon...?!"

The stiff nobility of her bearing collapsed in an instant. And for a moment, a girlish expression more appropriate for her age returned to Ferret's face as she gaped in shock.

But that quickly faded, and Ferret clenched her teeth to gather her wits once more. She shot her brother a glare both searing and frigid.

"...It seems to me that you have not been listening to me for quite some time now, Honored Brother."

"I'm saying this *because* I was listening." Relic said firmly.

Relic's sudden turn for the serious silenced Ferret for a moment.

"You've been overdoing yourself, haven't you?"

"Wh-what do you mean? I do not—"

"I can see right through you, Ferret."

"..."

Ferret went silent. Relic put down his cup of tea, sounding slightly sad.

"It's written on your face. Before, you used to react and respond to Michael, even if you were just getting angry at him. But now... you don't even try to meet him in person."

"That is not—"

"I told you before. Michael's injuries weren't your fault."

"..."

The girl in the black dress was at a loss for words. She slowly rose from her seat.

And without having properly defined her feelings for Michael, she answered her brother.

"...There is no meaning to my understanding that fact if I cannot *accept* it." She said mechanically, her eyes downcast as she turned away from the table. "My apologies, Honored Brother. I am feeling unwell; I will retire early."

"Hey, Ferret!" Relic called after her, but his sister left, her footsteps echoing in the darkness.

"...D'you think maybe I shouldn't have said that?" Relic asked the maid beside him, after the footsteps faded and silence returned to the dining room.

The maid bowed elegantly and replied.

"If I may be direct, Master Relic. You tend to be much too blunt. On many occasions, relationships between men and women are healed by time. And I believe it will take quite some time before Miss Ferret's heart is healed. Just the same as Michael's injuries."

"Time, huh. It's not like I don't get that, but... if we wait for her to heal by *our* perception of time..."

What worried Relic was the difference between vampires and humans.

Although he knew that they were the same at heart, there were still some insurmountable physical differences between the two species.

Because Ferret was immune to sunlight and flowing water, other than her regenerative capabilities, she was almost exactly like an ordinary human being. But time was one thing that still separated her from them.

Vampires could live for centuries—or even eternity. If they tried to interact with the world by their perception of time, Ferret could very well end up leaving Michael behind in the shadows of the past.

That was what Relic thought, but one of the maids replied,

"We can tell that Miss Ferret isn't the only one whose heart is troubled, Master Relic."

"What?"

"We aren't referring to decades' worth of time. Perhaps a year or two, at most."

"B-but even that's a very long time by human standards, isn't it?" Relic asked anxiously. A bespectacled maid gave him a gentle smile.

"You are only speaking from *knowledge*, not experience, Master Relic. The difference in our perception of time from that of humans only becomes noticeable after fifty, a hundred, or perhaps two hundred years. You are still essentially living at the same pace as human beings."

"B-but..."

"Master Relic, we have known Michael for quite some time now. And we don't believe that his feelings for Miss Ferret would wane so quickly."

A short-haired maid chimed in with a chuckle.

"You won't say you didn't already know, would you? Master Relic, you know Michael too well."

"..."

As Relic went silent, the maid who spoke to him first refilled his cup of tea and whispered with a bow.

"However... we do admire just how much you cherish Miss Ferret, Master."

"...You're all incredible."

Although he sounded defeated, Relic looked satisfied as he brought his teacup to his lips.

Savoring the clean, aromatic taste, he flashed a smile at the maids.

"Thank you. I guess I must have been overthinking things."

"Not at all. We apologize for having been so direct."

Relic was struck by the grace with which the maid bowed, and was reminded of just how much longer the vampires in green must have lived.

And so, as he marveled at the maids once more, Relic decided to voice a question that suddenly came up in his mind.

"Come to think of it... Just how old are you, everyone?"

The maids smiled all at once at his innocent question, and gently scolded him.

"A gentleman doesn't ask a lady her age, Master Relic."

Ferret's room.

"...I'm awful..."

Ferret had returned to her own room. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, blaming herself.

"How could I take out my anger on Honored Brother like that?"

Including her elegant covers, the interior of her room was a textbook example of an aristocrat's bedroom. The desk in the corner she used for reading and studying was a slight mismatch for the atmosphere, but even it was much more luxurious than a desk from the home of an ordinary family.

Normally, Ferret played a part perfectly matched to the refined and noble interior of this room. But now, she was curled up like a little bird trapped in her cage.

On her mind were the events that took place half a year ago.

It was on the first day of the island's annual celebration, the Carnale Festival.

Michael had been dragged into the attack of a Hunter who was targeting her, and was left with devastating injuries.

Feeling the brunt of the guilt for the incident, Ferret was overjoyed to hear several months later that Michael had finished his rehabilitation and was being discharged from the hospital.

But the guilt of having gotten him involved drove a tiny splinter into her heart, even though Michael did not blame her.

The sensation of something jabbing into the back of her head and her gut.

Too often the sensation clawed at her emotions.

One week after Michael was discharged from the hospital, he had visited the castle with his sister Hilda. The maids had been serving them tea.

Out of habit, Michael had reached for his cup with his right hand.

But partway through the action, he had pulled his right arm away and picked up the cup with his left hand.

That was all.

Drinking his tea as though nothing was wrong, he had cheerfully complimented the flavor and thanked the maids.

But that single scene had etched itself into Ferret's mind, digging into her thoughts like a knife.

"Although he can still move his arm, it will be difficult for him to regain the use of the fingers, even with rehabilitation."

That was the reality presented to her by the doctor.

The moment she heard the truth, Ferret sank deep into sadness.

But when she saw Michael and his unchanging smile, she felt as though she had been liberated from her guilt.

At least, until she saw his unmoving fingers with her own eyes.

Seeing was believing.

No matter how much she readied herself beforehand and acknowledged the fact ahead of time, the sight of reality came down like a hammer, rattling even her character.

Ferret's heart was left viciously shaken. Only the memory of the violence done to Michael continued to resurface in her thoughts.

For her, the powerless Michael would stand up against any adversity; adversity that he could not defeat—adversity that could kill him.

Again and again.

Again and again and again and again.

He would go so far for Ferret, who never showed him an ounce of warmth.

Countless memories piled together on top of one another in her mind. And so, she found herself unable to say a word.

For the first time, she felt a sense of distance between herself and Michael, who remained cheerful even with full knowledge of what had happened to him.

And she ended up realizing something.

The difference between humans and vampires.

The wall that stood between humans and vampires divided her from him in a way she had never once considered.

Her body was different from that of a human.

Some injuries, she was reminded, could not be healed.

Of course, even vampires had many weaknesses. In many cases, wounds inflicted by silver would never heal. And it was difficult to return to life once a vampire had been turned to ashes. But in that sense, even humans died when they were stabbed through the heart with a stake. And though they were immune to sunlight, humans could be killed and turned to ash by fire.

In spite of their weaknesses, vampires were much more resilient than humans. And Ferret went one step further, being an unusual vampire with no weaknesses to speak of. Although she, in exchange, had no special abilities, in some ways Ferret was even further removed from humans than other vampires by virtue of her perpetuity.

That was why she was so stricken with fear.

The fear slowly grew as she began to understand her repressed feelings for Michael.

The simple thought that she and Michael were different fanned the flames of her guilt.

Love between humans and vampires.

Michael had already crossed the boundary without even blinking.

But that same boundary stood as a wall before Ferret, looking for all the world like an indomitable fortress.

She had never dreamed such a thing would happen.

That the day would come when she desired to walk the same time alongside someone other than Relic.

That she would come face-to-face with the fact that such a thing was impossible.

Although she had the ability to suck blood, Ferret could not turn the humans whose blood she drank.

That was confirmed on the day of the incident, when she had attempted to turn Michael in order to save his life.

'...What exactly do I want of Michael?'

Her brother Relic could probably turn Michael into a vampire.

And if Ferret wished, Michael would give up his humanity without hesitation.

But was it forgivable to turn a human into a vampire for her own selfish reasons?

She questioned herself, beset by a kind of confusion she had never felt before in her life.

When her brother pinpointed exactly what she was feeling, Ferret was driven further into self-hatred. She was now clinging to a hope even more contradictory than her current state of being.

'...I want to see him.'

The boy she was treating coldly for the sole reason of his making her uncomfortable.

If she met him, the wounds in her heart would only deepen.

But on the other hand, it also felt as though hearing his voice could heal those hurts.



'...'

As she agonized over her contradicting emotions, another fear reared its head in her heart.

She had received no word from Michael in the past few days.

Until recently, he had come to the castle every day to try and meet with her. But he had been silent now for several days.

'What if he hates me now?'

Before, in spite of her chilly attitude, she still interacted with Michael. But for some time now she hadn't even thought of seeing him in person.

On one hand, she acknowledged that Michael had every right to stop liking her. On the other, she was also afraid that he blamed and resented her.

'...'

And she hated herself for suspecting such a thing, if only for a moment.

In the midst of her misery, Ferret realized that she had been clutching a stuffed animal that was beside her bed.

'How childish of me,' she thought, quickly thinking to put it back where it belonged. But then,

'Wait...'

The stuffed animal was a pink bat of an adorable design.

It was even more incongruous in her Gothic bedroom than her desk and her travel coffin.

'This was from Michael...'

Only several days after his very first confession to Ferret, Michael had come to see her with the downright lovable stuffed animal he had acquired somehow.

At first, she had complained, *"Are you making light of me, an aristocrat? I am not a child!"*. But in the end, she replied, *"Throwing this away would be discourteous to the one who put heart and soul into making this stuffed animal, so perhaps I shall donate it to some daycare on the island!"*, before proceeding to receive it and treasure it with all her heart.

Her eyes met those of the bat's, reminding her of that day. Ferret's eyes stung with tears.

She sat hanging her head for several minutes. But she eventually wiped her face and slowly looked up at the ceiling.

"...I'll go see him... tomorrow."

But her resolve to see him was no guarantee of things getting better.

The gap between them might only grow more pronounced.

But Ferret made up her mind.

Tomorrow, she would confess everything.

She would throw away pretenses and forget her noble status, being true to her honest feelings.

Even if her resolve would end in saying her goodbye to him forever, Ferret could not allow herself to stand there doing nothing as they grew more and more distant. That would be an insult to Michael.

As Ferret closed her eyes, her memories with him began to play like a film in the darkness.

Scenes of happy times and painful times alike.

And seeing the boy's smile in her memories, Ferret sank into peaceful sleep for the first time in a month.

But she still didn't fully understand the boy named Michael.

It was twelve hours later that she realized he was much more proactive a person than she ever gave him credit for.

Put frankly, Michael Dietrich was somehow different from ordinary humans.

Of course, that was probably why he was able to steal Ferret's heart away in the first place.

†

The next day. Michael's house.

"...He's... not here?"

Ferret was visiting a home near the castle, dressed up elegantly and holding a parasol. But greeting her at the entrance was Michael's sister and Relic's girlfriend Hilda.

"No. Sorry you had to come all this way."

"Not at all. It is my fault for having neglected to contact you ahead of time. In that case... When will he return? I shall come back when he is home."

Ferret had made up her mind to drop her noble mannerisms, but the moment she heard Michael was away, she found herself falling back on old habits.

In the past, she had been jealous of Hilda for daring to take away her family as a mere human being.

But that jealousy faded before it could ever turn to hatred, and now they were good friends. Perhaps even that was thanks to Michael showering her with affection.

If Michael did not exist, perhaps Ferret would have lost herself to envy and harmed Hilda to keep her away from Relic.

She was reminded once more of just how much Michael had affected her. She remembered that she truly needed to see him soon.

Ferret waited for Hilda's answer, wondering where she should kill time while she waited.

"Um... well... Ferret?"

"?"

"I'd love to invite you for some tea while you wait for him, but..."

Hilda sounded slightly awkward. Ferret could feel anxiety creeping on her thoughts.

Ferret knew that the Dietrich siblings' parents despised vampires.

Perhaps they had locked Michael in the basement so he could never see her again.

As Ferret worried with a strangely aristocrat-appropriate image on her mind, Hilda sighed and told her the truth.

"Michael won't come back to Growerth until next week."

"Pardon?"

"He said he found a part-time job on the mainland. They're giving him room and board."

"Wh-what? Where?!"

Hilda's eyes turned to dinner plates at Ferret's reaction. But she realized that, for some reason, Ferret was actively looking to meet Michael.

Hilda looked at her friend, who seemed unusually determined today. She thought for a moment before giving her an answer.

"He said I shouldn't tell you or Relic, but... I guess I can't keep this a secret. I was just wondering if I should tell Relic or not."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Well, it's about Michael's part-time job..."

Hilda trailed off, sighed deeply, and continued.

She needed a sort of determination before she could put her answer into words.

"Those Eaters who hurt you and Michael... Michael is working at the same place they are."

"...Pardon?"

"I only heard about it on the phone this morning. I was wondering how he'd gotten a job on the mainland..."

'What did she just say...?'

'The mainland?'

'Eaters?'

'Could she be talking about Shizune Kijima? Or... it can't be...'

'That armored man...?'

'A... a part-time job?!'

She was so bewildered that her thoughts faltered.

Unable to comprehend Hilda's answer for a moment, Ferret asked,

"Wh-what do you mean by that?"

"Apparently someone from the Organization came to Growerth a few days ago. And I think he liked Michael, so he offered him a part-time job. I tried to stop Michael, but he said he checked with the viscount through email and that there was nothing to worry about. Then he hung up. And he told our parents he was doing volunteer work for Growerth. They'd obviously try to stop him if they knew he was getting involved with vampires."

Hilda explained everything patiently. Anyone with a grasp of human language could understand what she meant.

Including Ferret.

"..."

"I know your father is going to be there, but I'm still worried. I mean, he said there are lots of good people there... but the people who hurt you and Michael are there too."

Hilda hung her head. This time, Ferret's eyes had turned to dinner plates.

She gaped silently like a beached fish, her sharp fangs emerging into view.

And before she knew it, her fists were trembling as she spat quietly,

"Do not..."

"Do not'?"

"Do not worry, Hilda."

Ferret's beautiful, pale face contorted very slightly as she declared,

"I shall contact Father immediately and bring that foolish Michael back to Growerth!"

As Hilda watched her friend run off, a smile rose to her lips.

Although Ferret had not yet noticed, Hilda realized that she was back to her old self.

Hilda was, of course, worried for her brother. But she was even more concerned for Ferret, who had been looking very troubled for some time now. Her declaration to bring Michael back was almost heartwarming.

"...She's not going to follow him to the mainland, is she?"

Hilda, slightly nervous, decided to prepare to leave as well. She did not want to be late for the moment Relic emerged from the coffin that sheltered him from the sun.

But Hilda had underestimated Ferret.

Although Ferret was indeed back to her old self, the momentum—or perhaps the determination—from the previous night continued to propel her. She was still stuck with tunnel vision.

By the time Hilda came to visit Relic's room, Ferret was already on a ferry headed for the mainland.

Still dressed in her fancy clothing, she departed for the sole reason of dragging Michael back—by force if necessary.

And so, whether he was present or not, Michael continued to play a great part in Ferret's life even today.

Chapter 2: Sins of the Vampires

Several days earlier. Waldstein Castle Laboratory.

There was a vast network of caverns underneath Waldstein Castle. Its walls were illuminated by the bacteria created by the former lord, Gerhardt von Waldstein.

In that soft light, the sound of running water pleasantly echoed off the rocks.

Layers upon layers of stalactites hung from the ceiling, matched underneath by stalagmites. On the surface of the rocks around them were distinctive yet organic patterns, emphasizing the natural origin of the caverns.

At the back of the caverns were calcified lime deposits in the shape of a staircase, and there were great pillars of connected stalactites and stalagmites that had probably been formed over tens of thousands of years.

If this area were to be revealed to the public, it would probably be swarmed with tourists from not only Germany, but the entire world. A little further to the back was the remains of an old execution ground, but even that was now an artifact of historical value.

Yet Gerhardt never chose to disclose this place to the public. Nor would Relic, the current Lord of Waldstein Castle, choose such a thing.

That was because the caverns did not belong to humans. They were an otherworldly realm filled with what humans called 'monsters', and an irreplaceable home to such 'Others'.

"Hey, it's Selim and Val! How're you doing?"

A surprisingly bold voice echoed in the space of 'others'.

Even in a world of darkness, Michael behaved no differently than he usually did.

"H-hello, Michael."

"Forget us—how're your injuries?"

Receiving Michael warmly were a vampire whose lower body was a gigantic flower, and a green-haired boy sitting in front of her.

The former was Selim, an alraune. The latter of Val, a vampire born from a watermelon.

"Completely healed, thanks for asking!"

Michael smiled with strangely unfounded confidence. Another voice then addressed him.

<Ah, hello there, Michael. How're things aboveground?>

The voice was coming from a small table, around which were seated several 'Others' engrossed in some sort of a game.

Because the 'Others' used the caverns as a sort of living room, many of them often brought tables, decks of cards, and other personal belongings.

It was, in a sense, very much like them to play a game in front of an execution ground. But the air around them was rather like that of a park or a community center.

The skeleton who first spoke to Michael put something on the table. And using a mysterious power, he activated the voice generator under his jaw to enunciate in a distinctive mechanical tone,

<It's a scary, scary world out there—can't even walk around at night without worryin' my pelvis off—>

Suddenly, the skeleton was cut off by the man sitting across from him.

"Sorry, Mr. Puzzle. *Ron*. Civil War, *yakuman*..."

<Tseng! What is this?!>

The skeleton with card suit markings carved in his skull rose from his seat in shock, his jaw dropping.

The man called 'Tseng' also possessed a strange appearance. He was dressed in the style of ancient China, but there were talismans stuck all over his body.

<Urgh... Not bad...>

"Heh heh... With this, I avenge myself for last month's defeat."

"Grrrowl..." "That was quite hopeless from the very start."

There were two others seated at the table. One was a skinny man wrapped entirely in bandages, the other was a werewolf with a blue mane. Although werewolves generally remained in human form, this one seemed to have gotten himself into some trouble, as he was currently in wolf form.

One of the things about the caverns underneath Waldstein Castle was that even such individuals could interact with others freely.

Michael entered that space without a care in the world.

The 'monsters' in the caverns, including the vampires, accepted him into their world without a hint of hostility.

The boy continued to chat with them as though he were speaking to his neighbors.

Suddenly, a snake as thick as a man's arm began to slither up his body.

"Whoa?!"

Many sharp-eyed snakes pulled his body back like rows of chains, and Michael was quickly embraced by something.

He could feel warmth, so different from the cold of the snakes. And he could feel softness, supple in a different way from the muscled forms of the reptilian creatures.

But before he could confirm the identity of the creature behind that form, she spoke from overhead.

"Mhmm. It's been a long time, Little Michael. Oh, I just can't stand it! You're still so cute I could hug you until all your bones snap!"

Smiling over Michael was a voluptuous beauty with long hair, shaking her head from side to side with a smile.

Through the fabric of her surprisingly thin clothing he could feel the suppleness of her bust. Although it might have been a rather envious situation for a boy of his age, one look at the woman's lower body would probably drive most humans away in shock.

Unlike normal humans, the woman's lower body was connected with countless serpents that were currently wrapped around Michael's body.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch! M-Melina! I'm really happy I'm getting buried in your chest and your snakes and I honestly can't say I'm not enjoying this at all, but you can't! My heart already belongs to Ferret!"

As Michael struggled, even with a helpless grin on his face, the half-human-half-snake called Melina giggled and released him.

"Hah hah! I was just playing around, Michael! You're so adorable when you're thinking about Ferret like that!"

Melina's appearance led many to mistaking her for a scylla out of Greek myth, but she would usually say, *"Actually... A scylla's got six dogs instead of snakes. But I do have a friend who fits that to a tee"*. Yet even before such a monstrous being, Michael smiled without a care.

"I'm always thinking about Ferret!" He said with his head held high. Tseng and Puzzle cheered him on.

<It's good to be young. Go for it, Michael.>

"A boy on the border between affection and love. Some things never change."

Selim and Val joined in on the heartwarming scene.

"Ferret is a wonderful person. You'll do just fine, Michael!"

"If only Ferret would be a bit more honest."

Soon, more 'Others' and even witches joined in on the conversation. Before he knew it, Michael was surrounded by nearly twenty vampires, witches, and other creatures.

"A thousand Euros on them getting married in three years."

"Isn't that too high for a starting bet?!"

"Then two thousand!"

"Why're you raising it?"

"*Ron*. Golden Gate Bridge."

<Ugh... Two *yakuman* in a row...>

"Ferret's basically unconquerable, though."

"But when it comes to Ferret, Michael's unstoppable."

"We're trying for a bloodless victory here, so conquest has nothing to do with it."

"If Michael wants to conquer Ferret, I think he just has to strip. Right now."

"Hey, someone call the cops! We got a cougar on the loose!"

"I'm not a cougar! I'm a *witch*! And do you really think you could judge a witch with human laws?"

"You're a witch, but you're still human to begin with, so you should have official records."

"Well, yeah! I mean, I'm a high-flying college girl!"

"...Which means you're eligible to get judged."

"Huh? ...Uh, wait. But, well, you can't prove magic with modern science, so maybe they could just call it lack of evidence..."

"What's magic got to do with being a perv?"

"Someone call a doctor!"

"Oh? I'm also in favor of Michael taking it off!"

"Not you too, Ms. Melina!"

"No! We really *won't* be able to judge you in a human court!"

"Someone call Circe!"

"Who?"

"The witch who turned Scylla into a monster in Greek myth."

"Greek myth?!" "That's total fiction!" "You have to be realistic here." "Your brain's too saturated with mythology." "Wh-what? Whaaaat?! But we're *werewolves*!"

<*Ron*. Big seven stars.>

"A double *yakuman*?!"

<Ha. Your talismans are smoldering.>

"You two have been getting nothing but *yakuman* for a while now... I call cheating."

"Grrrr..."

"...!" "—————" "... " < > " " " " " " "

.....

Michael slipped away from the commotion, which was quickly degenerating into another topic altogether, and continued into the caverns with a spring in his step.

The further he went, the more the walls of the cavern changed.

Other than the path in the ceiling that led to the underground lake, the route had no forks. And unlike the caverns, the path was clearly artificial. As nature gave way to man-made space, the glowing bacteria disappeared, replaced by lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling. Naturally, the path was much more even and could probably be traversed on a bicycle.

Ahead was a laboratory where lived a pair of vampires known as 'Doctor' and 'Professor'. Last time Michael came to visit them, there was a poster advertising a job opportunity as a test subject.

That was what Michael had come to inquire about, but when the laboratory came into sight, he realized that he was not Doctor and Professor's first guest that day.

Standing there was a strange man.

He was wearing a suit that seemed to be a shade of green, but it was a luminous fabric that shone in colors like gold, red, and blue depending on the way light reflected off it, making it difficult to tell the exact color.

More bizarre was the hat on his head, also luminous and green. It was the sort of top hat usually worn by quiz show participants.

It almost looked like pressing a button would sound a bell and a question mark would pop out. Michael initially wondered if there was a TV crew there to film something.

But three seconds later, he remembered that such a thing was impossible, and concluded that the man must be a vampire of some sort. That was because it was unthinkable for a human being other than Hilda or himself to be here. And even setting aside the man's clothing, the air around him was different from that around a human.

Although Michael didn't boast a particularly keen sense of observation, he had lived among humans and 'Others' for so long that sometimes, he found himself immediately judging whether someone was human or not.

'I've never seen this man before.'

Michael was suspicious for a moment in spite of himself, but,

"Oh well. Maybe he's a newcomer. I should say hi."

His doubt only lasted for a single second. He walked up to the suspicious and mysterious man without hesitation and talked to him as though chatting with a friend.

"Hi there. Nice to meet you."

"...? Ah. Nice to meet you." The man said, at first perplexed but quickly breaking out into a smile.

From closer, the man began to look even more mysterious.

He was still quite young.

But in spite of his relative youth, he was extremely tall. There was something unbalanced about the two features.

His large hat was pressed firmly onto his head, covering his eyebrows and making it difficult to read his expression.

If the man were to bow his head slightly, even his eyes would be half-covered. Michael wondered if the man could see a thing this way, but deciding that that was no way to greet a stranger, he started with a simple introduction.

"Um. Hi. I'm Michael. Michael Dietrich. Are you a new vampire here?"

"Ah! It's a positive *pleasure* to make your acquaintance! I am Doubs Hewley. As you've already pointed out, I am a vampire, one most indescribably insignificant. And you would be... a resident of this castle? Or an employee in the local tourism industry? You look quite human to me."

"Oh, uh... I'm old friends with the lord of this castle." Michael said agreeably, a little surprised at the man's very affable response.

"Ah, yes. The viscount did mention that the island was home to a new lord! ...Of course. You must be the young sweetheart of the viscount's daughter Ferret!" The man cried, making dramatic gestures and putting on a look of shock. Michael responded with an even more exaggerated flail.

"'S-sweetheart'?! That's... quite the term, but, uh, well... to me, Ferret's so sweet that my heart's kind of sort of feeling like it's filling with honey and I'm getting stung by a thousand bees every day!" Michael answered in panic.

The bizarre man snickered, amused.

"Now that is a marvelous metaphor! The stings of the bees that carry sweet pollen cannot be dislodged until they are torn from their very bellies! In other words, the stings of love that pierce your heart will remain with you for all eternity, 'til death do you part! Exceptionally excellent! Your reward is a bonbon. Which would you like? Mint-flavored? Or soda? Oh, shucks. Just take them both. Here, quickly!"

"Whoa! Thank you!"

It was a strange sight, the bizarrely excitable man and the boy receiving candy from him.

It seemed like there was some sort of communication happening between them, but from an outsider's perspective, it looked more like a suspicious man trying to lure a boy away with the promise of sweets.

Half of the man's face was hidden under the brim of his hat, and the sight of his eyes shining in the shadows was nothing short of eerie.

But without a care for such things, Michael grabbed the man's hands and shook them up and down, his face flushed red.

"This is amazing! Wow! I can't believe a total stranger recognized my relationship with Ferret, just like that! Ferret and I really must be connected by destiny or something. Oh, man! Now I really have to go see Doctor, quick!"

"Oh, yes. Of course... and would Theo-I mean, 'Doctor' be inside here?"

"Huh? You mean he's not? The viscount said Doctor's always in here..." Michael trailed off, turning toward the laboratory entrance.

Even now, the laboratory struck a stark contrast to the rest of the underground.

The rocks that made up the cavern walls cut off suddenly, giving way to a concrete wall.

It was a sight straight out of the ruins of an ancient lost civilization, or perhaps some underground vault in a bank, but all Michael wondered about it was, 'how did they build something like this?'.

In the middle of the concrete wall was a door one could find at any office. The electronic lock made it look somewhat like the door of a modern apartment building.

But the man next to Michael was very surprised at the jarring sight, either.

Michael had assumed the man was a newcomer, but perhaps this was not his first visit to the castle.

Thinking to himself, Michael pressed on the doorbell again and again. But the intercom was silent.

"Huh. Maybe they're out."

But as Michael shook his head, the man called Doubs brought his mouth to the intercom.

"Hah hah. It would be in your best interests to stop pretending you aren't home." He laughed, tapping on the intercom with his fingertips. And in that same tone, he continued, "if you don't hasten and hurry out of *there*, I can't guarantee what will happen to Michael *here*."

"Huh?"

Not understanding what the man was implying, Michael tilted his head.

Mere seconds later, the voice of a young boy crackled through the speaker.

<Good grief. Hold on a moment. Let me open the door.>

Though the voice was clearly that of a child, the register was that of an older man. And with the response came the sound of the electronic lock being unlocked.

"Ah, it's open! Sensationally stupendous! Let's step inside now—you too, Michael! Hurry hurry!"

"Uh, right!"

Deciding to not dwell on the confusing situation at hand, Michael followed the man into the laboratory.

Not realizing that his unguarded decision had just spelled out his fate.

†

Inside the laboratory.

"...It's been quite some time, young man."

"Yeah, it's been a while, Doctor! I was in the hospital longer than I thought, and this place completely slipped my mind. I'm really sorry. ...Huh? Where's Professor?"

"She's asleep at the moment. Her sleep cycle can be a little erratic."

The 'Doctor' Michael was greeting apologetically was, in appearance, a boy much younger than him.

In contrast to the average-looking Michael, the boy was beautiful—clearly on another level altogether. Because of the almost artificial beauty of his appearance, calculated like some ancient work of architecture, the boy's looks were almost otherworldly. But even his counter-natural looks were in themselves beautiful, making the boy called 'Doctor' look very much like an exotic monster.

He had shimmery silver hair like a mirror, and beautiful eyes that glinted like crystals. His irises were a light silver, juxtaposed against the pitch-black pupils within. His very eyes were like a pair of jewels.

His nose, ears, the shape of his lips, and the pale skin peeking from under the sleeves of his lab coat were no different.

His appearance was a miracle of sorts, like every negative feature had been removed for a yet-young plant. The very pinnacle of 'immature beauty'.

But the beautiful boy used the kind of language expected from someone much older than he appeared. It was extremely unnatural to behold, but it was nothing particularly unusual on Growerth.

After all, he was also a vampire, and as his appearance showed, one whose flow of time had stopped.



Eternal youth personified was wearing a dissatisfied look. In fact, he was looking quite wary.

Although Doctor usually joked around with and teased visitors, enjoying the confusion of others, he was strangely silent today.

"...Who are you, and what brings you here? I've no memory of seeing you on this island before."

"Ah, but you *did* see me through the security camera at the entrance just now, didn't you? I don't think I should have to introduce myself twice... is what I'd like to say, but since you've taken the trouble to ask, let me introduce myself. Re-introduce myself repeatedly, if you want! Because I love myself with an undying, unstoppable passion! Doubs. Doubs Hewley. If you like the name, I'll say it again! My name is Doubs Hewley. Every time I say my name, I'm greeted by a round of applause, a rush of human blood, and the shouts of kittens. They all cry, 'All Hail Doubs Hewley'! That is the world of my ideals, but I wonder if such a day will ever come?"

As Doubs recited his dreams and questions with his arms spread, Michael found himself clapping.

"Stupendous! To think a part of my dream would come true in such a split-second instant! Here, here! In thanks and congratulations, I shall present you with this photograph of myself. If you should ever come across a woman of staggering, stunning beauty, remember to hand this picture to her!"

"Thank you!"

Michael applauded as he received the photograph, in which Doubs Hewley smiled in the very same outfit he was currently wearing.

'This guy's awesome! It's decided. I'm going to say hi to Ferret next time with that kind of confidence!'

In contrast with Michael's indomitable optimism, Doctor spoke with cautious calm.

"...Why are you clapping, young man?"

"Huh? Uh, well, I just..."

"...I suppose your applause is not entirely unreasonable, so let me set that question aside for now. ...Doubs Hewley. What I want to know is the *purpose* of your visit, not necessarily your name. Of course, I've already learned of your moral character from that sight in front of the intercom."

"Ohhh... So you were pretending not to be home! Heh, that's actually a little childish of you." Michael said lackadaisically.

Doctor only mumbled, "Your character is in and of itself a talent, young man..." and went silent.

Not realizing that he had been used as a tool in the strange conversation between Doctor and the mysterious man, Michael could do nothing but stand in confusion.

The one to break the silence was the vampire who had been endlessly repeating, 'Doubs, Doubs' for some time now.

"Well, then. Seeing as this is our first meeting, let's get the formalities over with. What am I to call you? Should I follow the natural norms of this island and call you 'Doctor'? Or act as an older person might to a younger person and call you 'Young Theodosius'? Or 'Theo', like a friend? Or shall I close the gap a little more and give you a nickname? It's all up to you and also yourself!"

"What's that last part mean?" Michael wondered. The excitable man laughed.

"I only said it because it sounded frightfully fanciful. Don't let it bother you."

Realizing that Doubs would never stop at this rate, Doctor sighed and shot him a glare.

"How I treat you will depend on your purpose for coming. When I asked you who you were, I was not asking for your name; I was asking for your affiliation and purpose."

"Dear me. According to the viscount, you were supposed to be quite open to harmless jokes."

"...I've been feeling rather disinclined to them in more recent days."

"Hahahaha! Of course, of course! In other words, the incident six months ago is the reason for your moody melancholy!"

Doctor's expression faded.

"...So you're one of *them*."

"Yes! Extraordinarily excellent! To think you'd have already known! Your reward is a bonbon. Sweet is the reward given to those who reach the answer!"

"No thank you." The boy said coldly. Doubs closed his fist over the candy with a disappointed look.

And in the blink of an eye, a black cane rose up from his hand. Doubs spun the cane and struck the floor.

"Was that a magic trick?!" Michael asked, amazed. Doubs fixed his hat and struck a pose.

"Indeed! I happen to have a knowing knack for magic tricks, and holding magic shows for vampires each and every night is the most magnificent joy of my life! If you'd like, I could make Waldstein Castle itself vanish! ...Of course, only on television."

"Amazing! ...Oh, but if the castle vanishes, Ferret's going to lose her home, so you can't do that."

"Why, that's not a problem at all. That's when you step in to work and support your lady with your own two hands!"

"Yeah! That's it! That's perfect, Doubs!" Michael said with an innocent glint in his eye. But he quickly withdrew his smile and added worriedly,

"Come to think of it, there's a vampire magician in this castle named Mage. Your characterization overlaps."

"What?!" Doubs cried, spinning around with his gaze fixed on the ceiling. He finally fell to his knees as he supported himself by his cane.

"To think there would be *another* stage magician vampire... The moment I'd been dreading all this time has come upon us! To lose my unique idiosyncrasy is to lose proof of my own identity! This is nothing to brag about, but I live by no rule, no ideology other than that of my own selfish enjoyment! Losing my individual character is nothing less than death! My body may already be a living corpse, but this death will also be the death of my soul!"

"That's terrible!"

"Urgh... Now that things have come to this, I have no choice but to challenge that vampire to a magic duel! I'm terribly sorry, but please call this 'Mage' character here on my behalf! Have this entire bag of bonbons in exchange!"

"Oh, right!"

Michael did as he was instructed, running out into the hall with his cell phone in hand.

Watching him depart, Doctor sighed and took a seat in a nearby chair.

"...It will be at least ten minutes before Michael wakes Mage and brings him here from the castle. I'll commend your cunning, but it'd be best for you to disclose your business quickly."

"My, my. I'm glad you're quick to understand." The man snickered, and struck the ground with his cane again. "Well, then. Let me get straight to the point. I am from the Organization, here as a lowly officer. My color is iridescence—the moniker I received from the viscount is 'the Iridescent Extra'. It's a pleasure."

The man politely greeted Doctor, who sighed again.

But Doctor's response this time was different. No longer did he speak in a tone fitting an old man—his new tone was still more mature than his appearance, but it was still of a much younger than before.

"You Organization officers and your obsession with these monikers. Do *all* Colors have nicknames like a team of cartoon superheroes?"

"Yes. Some choose their names themselves, while those who are too embarrassed are given one by a committee. So it's really rather preferable to choose a winning moniker for yourself before you're stuck with an unflattering one. And speaking of which, don't you also have the recklessly remarkable nickname of 'Mass Murderer'?"

"...I didn't come up with that."

'Mass murderer'.

The moment the phrase came up, the air around Doctor turned frigid.

The self-proclaimed 'Iridescent Extra' spread his arms dramatically and twisted his lips into a revolting grin, one quite different from the smiles he had shown Michael.

"That nickname of yours has more than a little to do with the reason I'm here today."

"...Did Melhilm order you to kill me?"

"Positively preposterous! I may be beloved by the vampires of this world, but Melhilm despises me! And why in the world would he task an unrelated third party to take care of the remains of his experiments? Neither I nor the Organization have any reason to kill you at this point. Do I *look* like the old you, the kind of vampire who enjoys meaningless murder?"

"Then what does the Organization want with me now?"

Passing over Doubs' obvious provocation, Doctor pressed on to the point without batting an eye.

"Have you heard about the mysterious incident that took place last week in the mountains in southern Germany?"

"..."

"Ah, so you have. Then you know what I'm here to—"

"It wasn't me." The boy spat, disgusted. He did not even hear Doubs out to the end.

But the vampire in iridescent clothing ignored him and continued on with his own discussion.

"You couldn't possibly *not* know about it! After all, every channel is simply swamped with reports about this case! A sleepy, peaceful village in the mountains! What was the disaster that struck this little settlement? Was it brought on by man? Or the gods? Or beings from another dimension? And in the end was left behind but one little girl! It's a superbly sensational news story, perfect for blowing away the boredom of peaceful existence."

"..."

"But there's something that the media hasn't announced even now, as real estate prices take a nosedive in mountain villages. Did you know, by any chance, that a certain *rumor* is floating around the area?"

"No." The boy shook his head, displeased. Doubs answered energetically.

"They say that the villagers were killed by a vampire."

"...!"

"It's understandable that such a rumor would pop up in the wake of such an incident. But the Organization can't take this lightly. After all, we have your precedent."

"So I'm being suspected." Doctor said, clenching his fists.

Although it did not show on his face, his conflicted emotional state was plain from the look in his eyes.

The colors of his emotions swirled and blended, impossible to describe in a single word.

Anger. Sadness. Hatred. Regret. Despair.

His negative emotions were distilled again and again in his heart, leaving behind a disgusting gunk of sentiment lurking beneath his beautiful exterior.

But Doubs neither apologized nor mocked him, instead holding up his index finger with a constant smile.

"Tut, tut, tut. There certainly *are* some among the Organization's members who suspect you, but the viscount cleared it all up with a whole wall of words saying, 'That is not possible'. And even Melhilm, who turned you into a vampire, says that your involvement is unlikely. And above all else..."

Doubs paused, wagging his finger.

"...Above all else, I don't suspect you, either."

"...?"

Doctor was at a loss. Doubs continued.

"You probably don't know much about the Organization's members other than Melhilm. But we know quite a bit about *you*. And from the store of information in our grasp, we can reach a certain conclusion..."

Before Doctor realized it, Doubs had put on an expression at once joyful, sad, and nostalgic.

"From what I recall, *your* crimes were much more atrocious."

"..."

Doctor maintained his silence in the face of many provocations.

But coming back to life in his mind were the memories of his past, flooding past at a speed unthinkable for humans.

The memories of the sins he committed as a vampire.

And the sin he committed as a human being.

†

The past.

About twenty years ago, there lived a human boy in a city in northern Germany.

His name was Theodosius Waldstein.

At the time, he was seven years old.

The name 'Waldstein' came from the noblemen who lived in Waldstein Castle on the island of Growerth, and the boy often traveled to the island with his parents.

But in the modern world, the boy was not an aristocrat. He had no claim to the castle.

Even so, he felt a strange draw to the island and the castle. He begged his parents and visited Growerth time and time again.

And it was as he walked the island alone one day that he met the girl.

It was a typical story.

The sun was setting, and stars were beginning to sparkle overhead. The boy was crying, having been separated from his parents.

The one who helped the lost boy and took him back to the castle was a girl in red who had long black hair.

She was nearly ten years older than he was, but the girl was not quite a young woman. On the way to the castle, she expressed surprise at the name 'Theodosius Waldstein'. Then, she smiled gently.

"You must be a relative of the viscount."

The boy thought her words strange.

The title of viscount did not exist in Germany, but the boy, too young to know that, had been confused by the phrase 'relative of the viscount'.

In the light of dusk, the girl put on a mysterious smile and softly leaned in toward his face.

Until that point, Theo had grown up hearing that he was pretty enough to be a girl.

But even he found his heart being stolen away by her.

By her ethereal beauty.

Her skin was porcelain white, too natural to have been covered in powder.

Her gaze was powerful and piercing. One look was enough to make him feel like she had tapped him on the back.

There was no warmth coming from the breath that escaped her lips, and it felt as though a colorless fog was stroking his face.

The girl's fingers, softly entwined with his, were at once naturally and artificially beautiful, like a doll or a painting given life. His nerves tingled at the smooth, cold texture of her fingertips; he began to lose himself in her allure.

Beautiful. Pretty. Cute. Cool.

Could a seven-year old boy have the vocabulary to describe her?

In the end, unable to say a word, the boy froze.

He had no other choice.

When he had grown, Theo went on to say,

"If that's what it feels like to be paralyzed, I don't think I would mind being that way for the rest of my life."

All she did was lean into his face.

But that alone was enough to drive her image into his heart and enslave him, whether he liked it or not.

"Let me tell you a secret."

The girl smiled faintly, and...

"You see, I'm a vampire."

†

Present day.

Her face. Her voice. Her beautiful black hair, fluttering in the wind of dusk.

His memories, though from his time as a human, came rushing back to him in perfect detail.

But the moment his thoughts reached that point, Doctor's reminiscences came to a sudden stop.

"Hello? Are you listening?"

"Ack!"

Doubs' face was right before Doctor's eyes. The brim of his hat touched Doctor's forehead.

With an uncharacteristic scream, Doctor pulled back his chair and prepared to raise his voice. But,

"I brought him!"

Michael's voice echoed from the laboratory entrance, followed by the sound of rushing feet.

"...Has it already been so long?"

"Yes. My riotous rambling took up quite a bit of time. But really. I used every provocation in the book to try and get you angry, but you ended up falling asleep! The reward for your patience is a bonbon."

"I've already told you that I have no need for such things!" Doctor responded, reverting to the tone of an old man. At that very moment, Michael pushed open the door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Doubs! He'll be here in a sec." He said, not knowing what kind of conversation had been taking place until just moments ago. Of course, even if he knew, he wouldn't have let the atmosphere dictate his attitude.

"By the way, I'm sorry about saying that stuff about your characters overlapping. Even if you lose to Mr. Mage, I'll still think you're a swell guy! No one who notices my relationship with Ferret could possibly be a bad person." Michael said, disturbing the atmosphere of the room. Doubs chuckled.

"I'm very grateful to hear that! But that attitude of yours won't last very long."

"Why not?"

"Once you learn who I am, you'll come to hate me. I can't wait to see the look on your face when I reveal the truth."

Just as Michael tried to respond to Doubs' mysterious claims, an even greater disturbance piled into the lab.

"Yo!" "Hey, where's Professor?" "Maybe she's asleep."

"I see. So there's no one around today to chase us out."

"Then again, not even Professor's a match for us once we get serious." "Our seriousness is a pretty big deal." "The problem is, we never got serious." "Getting serious is tough, huh?" "Anyone who can get serious is a genius." "We don't need to be geniuses... determination and effort are the true motivators of life!" "That's pretty awesome! You're one heck of a genius!" "Heh heh heh... Once I get serious, nothing will be a challenge."

"Now, let's settle down and watch this magic duel while we slowly extort money from Doctor!" "Interesting. Then the magic duel will involve getting the money out of Doc's safe and into our hands as fast as possible." "Great idea."

The intruders were a group of vampires who lived in Waldstein Castle. They were originally subordinates of the mayor of Neuberg, a dhampyr named Watt Stalf. But a certain series of incidents left them there as freeloaders.

Before they were vampires, they were unemployed bums. And they were by nature they lazy.

They were long-lived NEETs who neither lorded over nor subjugated humans.

That was why they constantly battled the demon called boredom, poking out their heads at the mention of any entertainment.

They had heard about the duel from Michael as he passed by, and had come to the lab with carefree excitement.

"So who's this magician s'pposed to be, anyway-"

At that moment, they spotted the iridescent figure in the corner of the room.

The vampires froze simultaneously.

"..."

As they went silent at once, Michael frowned in confusion.

"What's wrong, guys?" He asked, now on friendly enough terms with them that he could treat them like equals.

That was when a straggler entered the lab.

"Heh heh heh... Who might this challenger be, ignorantly making a claim to my title?"

He was an Asian vampire known to all as 'Mage'. For him, magic was not only a hobby but also an integral part of his own identity. He had rushed over to the laboratories, thrilled at the news of a fellow vampire magician.

"..."

But the moment he caught sight of the man in iridescent clothing, his thrill turned to despair.

"Er... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACK?!"

"Oh, so it was *you*. Now this is quite the quaint encounter. I'm looking forward to seeing how much your magic has improved after your time working for Watt Stalf."

The man snickered, his eyes glinting from under the brim of his hat. Mage could only tremble blankly.

Michael looked back and forth between Mage and Doubs.

"D'you know each other?"

"Do we *know* this guy?! Damn it... Do you *not* know who this bas-I mean, this guy is?!" One of the freeloader vampires cried.

"Of course I do. His name's Doubs Hewley."

"If you'd told us that earlier, we'd never have come here in the first place!"

"?"

"That guy's one of the Colors at the Organization! Mr. Watt doesn't *compare* to this guy!"

Before Michael could respond,

"That's correct."

Doubs himself took the reins of the conversation.

"I am an officer of the Organization. The very same Organization that created the Eater who attacked your beloved and took away the use of your right hand. The very group that used that Eater to wreak havoc on Growerth."

His tone had done a 180. His voice dripped with malice.

Doctor, who watched from the side, could tell with painful ease exactly what Doubs Hewley was intending.

Though it had only been a short time since their meeting, Michael had already shown Doubs trust and friendship.

Doubs went out of his way to declare that he was the enemy, probably intending to relish Michael's dismayed reaction.

'Despicable...'

Michael's back was turned to both Doubs and Doctor.

Curious to see what kind of a face he was wearing, the former slowly circled round to take a look.

Just as Michael did not know Doubs beforehand, Doubs also knew nothing about Michael other than the fact that he was Ferret's friend and a victim of the Eater attack.

He truly knew nothing about Michael.

After all, when he finally glimpsed Michael's face,

He was surprised to see that there was no change in his expression.

With the very same smile from before, Michael responded,

"Wow, that's amazing!"

"...What?" Everyone else exclaimed.

They looked around at one another, and even Doubs opened wide his shadowed eyes.

"So you're a friend of the viscount! Could you pass on a message to him? Relic and Ferret've been worried about him since he hasn't been back to the island." He said, as cheerful as ever.

He was not pushing himself to behave in this way.

He was not avoiding reality.

Although he talked as though nothing was wrong, Michael's actions were absurd.

"Young man... Did you not understand? After what happened to you and Ferret..." Doctor said.

"What about it?" Michael asked, titling his head.

"The injury to your arm was devastating, was it not?"

"Oh, that's what you're trying to say. But the guy who attacked me was the man in the armor. His voice was different, and more importantly, that armor guy was the worst of the worst—he put down me and Ferret's love! There's no way he's the same person as the guy who called me Ferret's sweetheart." Michael said with a chuckle. Doctor still looked astonished.

"Young man... do you not resent the Organization? If not for them, neither you nor Ferret would have been injured so!"

Michael seemed to be surprised at Doctor's question. He withdrew his laugh and put on a more serious look.

"Hm... Y'know, I never thought of it like that. And besides, the viscount said that Ferret's parents met in that Organization. So if the Organization never existed, neither would Ferret. So really, I should be thankful. I think."

He thought for some time, but found no answer. Michael turned to the Iridescent and smiled a grin of pure innocence.

"I'll take my time thinking about that stuff later. So, what's the magic duel going to be like? Sawing yourself in half? ...Wait, vampires could cut themselves in half and still come back, so I guess that wouldn't be magic. Then, how about poking crucifixes into a box, or teleportation? Oh, but you'll need some judges to score your performance. This is just my opinion, but you should make Ferret the main judge and me the assistant who sits next to her, and..."

Michael's rambling turned into a whisper at the very end. The Iridescent Extra was silent for a moment.

Was he upset that he had been denied a show of despair, Doctor wondered. He broke into cold sweat, fearing that Doubs would attack Michael.

But the emotion that flashed by Doubs' eyes was a hint of confusion,

And unparalleled excitement.

"Interesting..."

Suppressing the thrill emanating from within, Doubs began at a mumble but quickly let his mouth run wild as he cried out to the heavens.

"STUPENDOUS! Absolutely astonishing! You, Michael, are a human possessed of a pathetic flaw that also works as an incomparably incredible strength! Marvelous! I would reward you with money, but even the act of putting a price on this show seems despicable to me! Ah, the viscount *did* say that I would find some interesting humans here, but to think he was talking about you!"

"Huh? What? Uh... I don't really get what you're saying, but thanks!" Michael said, very lost.

He was not the only one. The other vampires were also equally confused, watching Doubs and Michael laugh without knowing why.

"Oh! That reminds me." Michael said, his eyes snapping open as he turned to Doctor.

"Doctor, I saw some help wanted ads last time I came here. Are you still recruiting? I'm actually hurting for some money right now."

His oblivious nature was practically a talent. The vampires wanted very much to point out his blindness, but they were beaten. The Iridescent tapped Michael on the back.

"Were you looking for part-time work?"

Giving Michael a thumbs-up, Doubs winked and put on his most excitable face yet.

"Actually, there's going to be a rather large event taking place at the end of the month. We just happened to be looking for some help!"

Chapter 3: Soirée of the Vampires

A city in southern Germany.

It was southeast of Munich, near the border and just north of the Alps.

The place at the center of the so-called 'supernatural incident'.

There was a city in the hills surrounded by mountains. Though relatively small, it had a population of over thirty thousand and was outfitted with everything one could find in a major urban center.

Having no particular specialties or attractions, the city was never usually put into the spotlight.

But now, it was the focus of worldwide attention.

The mass disappearance.

Such an incident would not have made much impact in the past. But this modern-day mystery took place in a time when information could be transferred instantly from one place to another.

Naturally, the police and the government had no choice but to investigate the very real mass disappearance. As it had taken place near the border, rumors spread about the incident being committed by foreign crime syndicates. But that possibility was denied from the outset, and the more the investigation continued, the more people began to believe that it was the work of demons.

Understanding that the police were making no progress on the incident, journalists from all over the world began spewing out their own hypotheses.

The people of the city, of course, were nothing but annoyed at the case. But at the same time, the incident began to fan the flames of fear within the populace.

It was an incident they had no way of understanding.

If it had taken place in a land far, far away, or somewhere out of sight, they would have probably accepted the disappearance as a supernatural incident. One that made only small ripples in their world.

But when they woke up in the morning and opened the window, they saw the mountains.

It had happened on those mountains. The disappearances were not things of another world.

And as the truth behind the incident remained lost, the internet began to theorize about poison gas, cults, or strange pandemics. Even the thought of such things was enough to grip the people's minds in paranoia.

More and more people were leaving for other parts, at least until the incident came to a close. And other than those with a specific interest in the case, fewer and fewer people were approaching the mountains.

In the midst of the change, a certain rumor began circulating the streets.

Slowly, but surely.

The formless rumor began to cement itself into the citizens' minds as it began to fix its hold upon the populace.

'The village was attacked by vampires.'

Most people, in most other times, would laugh off such a story.

But the marks on the survivor's neck and the complete disappearance of the villagers were facts that they faced every day. And as anxiety spouted left and right in the midst of that confusion, the fear turned into a great weight that pressed down upon the people.

It grew heavier and heavier, little by little.

Creak.

Creak.

Their thoughts began creaking.

Their hearts began warping, giving way to cracks.

Through the cracks the rumors began to seep, spreading poison into their thoughts. It ate away at the edges of their reason and common sense, twisting their minds.

And as a result, they began to think—even as they balked at the mention of vampires—

That maybe, just maybe, vampires really were the answer.

Such thoughts worsened the anxiety bearing down over the people. And in the end, the entire city was beginning to creak under the strain.

And the first echoes of the creaking,

Began next to the little girl who escaped the disappearance.

It had been nearly two weeks since the incident.

The girl remained utterly silent.

Initially, she had testified that the village was attacked by strangers. But as time passed, her words grew fewer and fewer, until she finally stopped talking about the case altogether.

She must have finally understood the full magnitude of the villagers' disappearance, the police assumed.

But not everyone agreed.

Her eyes grew visibly blank. As she stopped talking about the incident, she began to noticeably build up a wall with the world around her.

Perhaps she had been bitten by a vampire and was subjugated.

Perhaps she was already a vampire herself.

The tiny but deep wounds in her neck.

They remained with her even now, showing no signs of healing. People began to wonder.

At first, they were extremely reluctant to bring it up. Knowing that it was an unbelievable idea, they did their best to keep their questions to themselves.

But as time passed, people began to whisper, one after another.

'Someone I know said something real crazy the other day...'

Averting responsibility, packaging their suspicions as jokes.

In place of the reeds that revealed King Midas's secret, people used 'baseless rumors' in order to satiate their curiosities.

Following the story of the king, the reeds would one day grow dense and begin to cry out, 'The king has a donkey's ears!'

And the people would believe.

They would believe in the unbelievable. The idea that the king had donkey ears. The idea that vampires were responsible for the mass disappearance.

The rumor that the girl was bitten by a vampire slowly became a fact to the people, passing by word of mouth from one person to another.

The creaking began to reverberate.

†

"Sorry I'm late! I got overloaded at work today." Laughed the uniformed man as he stepped through the door. There was a little girl waiting for him there.

The man's name was Horst Gedeck.

He was a young postman, and—with the exception of the girl—the first on the scene of the incident.

The girl at the door was the lone remaining villager.

"How are you, Alma? Any change on your end?"

The girl called Alma quietly shook her head, showing no emotion.

After the investigation, the girl was left with nowhere to go. She was initially hospitalized for a health examination, but she soon ended up in the care of the postman who first found her.

The postman's elderly parents lived in Munich. He was still single, living alone in this city. He certainly wasn't the type to be at the top of a list of potential foster parents, but he was given custody of the girl for two reasons.

One, she had opened her heart to him somewhat.

Two, no one else wanted to take her in.

Vampires were not the only subjects of hushed rumors. Stories about mysterious diseases and international crime rings, among countless other absurd theories, were flying everywhere. The authorities considered leaving her with the police, the hospital, or perhaps an orphanage far away because of the potential shock. But no one had asked the girl for her opinion.

In other words, it was only when the postman stepped up and volunteered to take custody of the girl that she found a place to be.

Although there was still a shadow cast over Alma's eyes, she had brightened up considerably since the incident.

At the same time, it was hard not to admit that she had grown visibly quiet.

Normally, a witness might be more inclined to discuss details of an incident after the shock had passed. But for the girl, it was the opposite. She began to avoid it.

But Horst did not pry. He did his best to help the girl adjust to a normal life once more.

There was a large piece of gauze on her neck. Horst knew what was underneath, but he never asked about it.

For some reason, he felt as though it was a forbidden subject.

"We got a big load of mail out of nowhere. Feels like I had to run around twice as much as before. Heh."

"...Is it because of the case?"

"Hm?"

"Maybe it's because... people are worried about their friends who live here. So... they're sending so many letters to see if everyone's all right..." The girl mumbled, hanging her head. Horst frantically waved his hands.

"No no no! Not at all! It's just that time of year! It's got nothing to do with what happened. And... and even if it did, that's not something for you to worry about, is it?"

"...Yeah."

Her voice was weak, but she made sure to answer Horst.

"Anyway, let's eat. I picked up some really good sausages on the way back."

"...Yeah."

Was it just his imagination? He thought he saw Alma smile.

Horst breathed a small sigh of relief.

But at that moment,

Thunk.

There was a dull noise outside, like something had been crushed underfoot.

Alma flinched. Horst ran up to the door to see what had happened.

"Who's there?!" He cried, but there was no response.

"...Go hide somewhere, okay?" He instructed Alma, and took a deep breath.

Horst swung open the door. But,

"...No one...?"

The silence of evening filled the street.

A chill ran down his spine. In his paranoia, Horst began to survey the area.

He then found the source of the noise.

A knife in the shape of a crucifix, driven deep into his mailbox.

He anxiously pulled it out and turned.

And he spotted graffiti sprayed onto his wall.

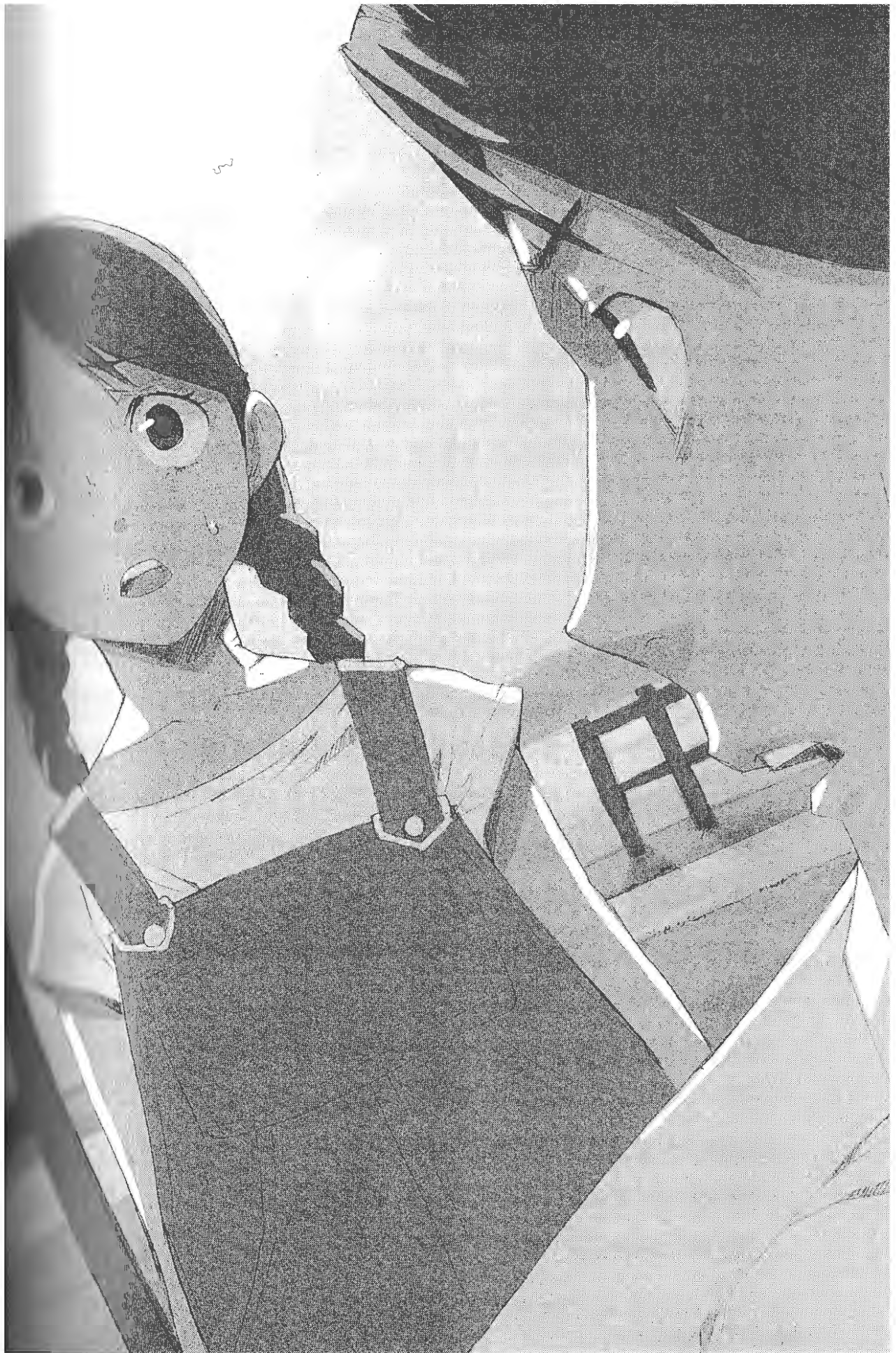
'Carve out the zombie's heart'

It was an incredibly vile act of vandalism, especially since the wall belonged to a private residence.

'Shit! What the hell?! Why the hell does everyone buy into those rumors without even seeing Alma in person?!'

Venting his aimless anger, he turned to the door to erase the graffiti.

"...!"



There stood Alma, white as a sheet and staring at the graffiti.

"...Alma..."

He didn't know what to tell her.

Although he only hesitated for a few seconds, it was long enough a silence that Alma turned away and ran into the house.

What was the shadow cast over her face? Fear? Worry? Or anger at the act of indiscriminate hate?

Unable to confirm a thing, Horst quietly followed Alma inside.

Not knowing what to say. Not even knowing how to comfort her.

The piece of graffiti was, to some, nothing more than a silly prank.

But it was the first sign of the distorting world that reached Horst and Alma.

†

Several days later, on the seas.

The orange light of dusk warmly embraced the girl standing on the deck.

Ferret had left the island in pursuit of Michael, boarding the ferry to the mainland.

Some might assume that a vampire could just transform into a flock of bats and leave the island. But depending on the individual, a vampire could be greatly weakened or incapacitated by the sea. Ferret, however, could not transform to begin with.

In exchange, she was able to show her beautiful face under the sunlight.

But for some reason, there was a tinge of sadness in her gaze.

"...Michael..."

Mumbling to herself, Ferret thought,

'Why do you always have to be that way?

'Never looking to see what's around you...'

Ferret herself was actually the reason he never looked around himself, but she did not even consider the possibility. She continued staring with her hands clasped around the railing.

'Honestly... you...

'You... You're so...'

"Once we meet... Where and how shall I beat you to a pulp?"

Her expression instantly clouded over with anxiety. Ferret tightened her iron grip on the railings.

The reinforced railings twisted and bent along the shape of her fingers.

†

"Ah... Atchoo!"

"Oh? A cold, perhaps?"

On the way to the Organization, Michael suddenly sneezed.

"That aside, that's quite the curious sound. I've lived a long time myself, but I know of only one other human who could manage such an uncommonly unusual sneeze."

"Huh...? Nah, it's just an old habit... Atchoo!"

"Will you be all right? They say that even a common cold is the cause of every contagion."

"Heh. I bet it's just someone talking about me." Michael chuckled, wiping his nose. Doubs grinned.

"Then it might do you some good to sneeze one more time."

"Why?"

"In Eastern tradition, the number of sneezes is said to specify the sort of talk that goes on behind your back. Once, one is complimented. Twice, one is hated. Three times, one is beloved. Four times, one catches cold while out at night. Five times, one is a selfish freeloader. Six times, one is a good-for-nothing. Then seven times, and so on. Although admittedly, the explanations become more confusing as the numbers get higher. But now! Just one more sneeze, and you'll be on the receiving end of someone's love!"

"R-right! I'll do my best!"

Though on the surface, they were exchanging idle banter, underneath them ran complex currents of thought that no tradition could define.

Of course, Michael was already long used to it.

†

"...What're we supposed to do? Talk to her?"

"...Like hell."

From a distance, a pair of werewolves were watching Ferret crush the railings in her grip. They were tailing her without her notice.

They were an eye-catching duo, one with blue hair and the other shaved bald. But they did not have to worry about being spotted, as Ferret was still locked in tunnel vision.

"So we followed Miss Ferret, just like Granny Job and the maids told us to. But... uh... now what?" The bald werewolf wondered. His blue-haired friend sighed.

"We just gotta watch her to make sure she doesn't end up killing Michael while she's beating him to a pulp."

"...Gonna be pretty tough."

They sighed and continued to watch Ferret, whose shoulders were trembling. With cold sweat running down their backs, spooked by the anger emanating from her form.

So, Michael and Ferret found themselves heading south.

Not knowing in their wildest dreams what they were about to get into—but so determined that even if they knew, they would not stop themselves.

After all, setting aside their exact emotions, they were setting off for one another's sakes.

Some time passed.

†

The next evening, on the property of the Mars family in Germany.

Riches.

Wealth.

Affluence.

Fortune.

Prosperity.

Luxury.

Or, put simply, possession.

Money and money and money.

Those who stood head and shoulders above the rest, with incomparable riches in their hands.

In societies both capitalistic and not, it was an incredibly easy position to understand. And depending on their possession of titles, they could be called multibillionaires or aristocrats. Then again, aristocracy wasn't an infallible indicator of wealth.

The Mars family, based in the United Kingdom, had little to do with position or prestige. But at the same time, it possessed phenomenal affluence.

The Mars family owned property all over the world. And though the land was in the relatively inexpensive countryside, each and every piece of real estate was massive.

However, it did not own companies or manage businesses. The Mars family came to power through the stock market and investments in special events.

In the past, it might have qualified as nouveau riche. But now, the Mars family was a powerful family with a long tradition, far from the ostentation of arrivistes.

The Mars family also owned land in southern Germany. In that countryside estate was built a little England.

It was a country house—a kind of enormous mansion built by British nobles to display their wealth.

On one hand, the Mars family's country house bore all the splendor and majesty of a castle. Yet on the other hand, free from the threat of battle, the walls were adorned with unique elegance and beauty rather than fortification.

Depending on the era and individual, some nobles owned hundreds of thousands of luxurious manors. In England, many of these collections had become tourist attractions.

But the Mars family's country house in Germany was different. Rather than being displayed to the world, it lay quietly in a plain somewhere in the mountains.

Of course, 'quiet' was too small a description for a manor so large.

The best way to describe the property would be, not to measure it, but to note that one would have to travel through over three kilometers of gardens to reach the manor from the closest gates.

It was about average-size as far as country houses went, but the fact that the manor was built in another country, and that it was but one of many, spoke for the affluence of the Mars family.

It was said that the current family head was a young girl, but for some reason, no specifics about her were ever brought to light.

The family headship was supposedly passed down through the female line, and the head only showed her face when she came to take the headship. The succession only happened once every several decades. But no matter the generation, each head looked remarkably similar to her predecessors. Understandably, some began to wonder if every Mars head thus far had actually been the same person.

Naturally, their speculation was absolutely true.

†

Michael was sitting in a black luxury car, slowly making his way along the stone-paved garden road.

He opened the tinted windows and took in the sights.

The scene lit under the moon was enough to make him forget that he had only just passed through the gates into the estate.

The garden was home not only to a forest, but a river. Not a tiny stream—it was a proper river that boats could float along with ease. The stone bridges that crossed the river were supported by four crosspieces, and a boat was passing underneath at a leisurely pace.

Apparently the river did not flow naturally, and the current was artificial. But the fertile soil and greenery all around them made it difficult to believe everything was man-made.

But the incredibly articulated placement of the trees themselves were testament to the artificial nature of the garden.

"...Is this supposed to be a theme park?" Michael wondered, unable to hide his awe. The man who still insisted on wearing an iridescent suit chuckled.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Of course, you won't find much in the way of human families or cozy couples out on a stroll."

"?"

Michael responded with a look of confusion. Doubs turned his gaze to the garden and answered.

"It's no different from the island of Growerth. Her many estates, scattered all over the world, is opened to what humans call 'monsters'. This glorious garden belongs to outsiders, so to speak."

"Ohh." Michael nodded, and wondered, "what's the lord here like?"

"She's only a landowner, so I'm afraid the term 'lord' isn't quite accurate. But she is about three hundred years old. She was originally human before she was turned, so she doesn't look drastically different from yourself."

Unlike vampire-borns, who stopped aging at the peak of their physical growth, those who were turned stopped aging at the moment they became vampires.

In other words, the girl Michael was soon to meet only *appeared* to be young. In actuality, she was an adult with centuries' worth of life experience under her belt.

Just as Michael began to wonder if she talked like an old woman, just like Doctor, a large structure appeared before them.

"Whoa... Is this... a castle?"

"Not at all! This is a privately-owned country house. It's a world away from my own life, so I personally can't even bring myself to get jealous."

In size alone, the structure ahead was a match for Waldstein Castle. Although it wasn't quite as high, the country house was spread out over a such a wide space that it could probably fit an entire village inside.

'Oh! It's like one of those huge shopping malls on the mainland.' Michael thought to himself. The car slowly approached the building.

"Ah, pardon me, driver. Stop the car." Doubs said suddenly. The driver silently complied.

"What's wrong?"

"I spot someone I recognize."

Michael looked around and looked in the same direction as Doubs.

There was a young boy walking down the stone path at a saunter. He had silky black hair that was partly dyed red, and was wearing gothic-style pants and a T-shirt. Although in style alone he looked like a musician, he was still very young. About twelve years old in appearance. He looked like a child who was forcibly dressed up by goth-obsessed parents.

There was a strange glint in the boy's eyes—a magnetic pull that drew in anyone who met his gaze. At the same time, the aura he emanated, almost in a gothic lolita fashion, deterred people from approaching.

The man in the iridescent suit opened the window and poked out his head, addressing the boy.

"Care for a lift, Fannie?"

"Oh! Hey, Mr. Doubs. Uh... may I?"

The boy's childlike tone was a striking contrast to his manner of dress. Fannie smiled and ran over to the car, opening the door on Michael's side.

"Oh."

Having only just noticed Michael's presence, Fannie froze.

"Whoa! Sorry. I'll scooch over a bit."

As Michael slid over to the middle seat, next to Doubs, Fannie slowly stepped inside and shut the door.

"...Who are you? A newbie?" The boy asked cautiously. But before Michael could answer, Doubs butted in.

"A friend of mine. He's a human, not a vampire, so there's really no need for careful caution."

"Right. The name's Michael. It's nice to meetcha."

Michael held out his hand with a smile. Fannie breathed a sigh of relief. At that point, his attitude did a 180 as he took Michael's outstretched hand with a confident snort.

"Oh, so you were human. I thought you were a new officer or something. My name's Fannie Lou. I dunno what you're doing here, but don't worry. I only drink girls' blood." Fannie said with a condescending snicker. But Michael was not at all bothered.

"Yeah! Hope we get along. Man, I thought I'd be the only non-adult guy at the conference. Glad to see I've got a fellow minor here."

Fannie suddenly put on a sulk, glaring up at Michael.

"...Y'know, I'm actually older than you. By about five hundred years."

"What?! Seriously?!"

"You bet. Heh, scared yet?" Fannie said, holding his head high. Doubs chuckled.

"This coming from a vampire who bursts into tears every time a girl calls him scary? It's always amusing to see you putting up a strong front toward men and adults."

"M-Mr. Doubs!"

"And Michael, don't worry about Fannie's age and formalities. He's honestly lived for countless centuries, but it's only been about ten years since he took on human form. Psychologically, he's still a youthful youngster."

"Oh, is that how it is?"

'Kinda like Val, huh.'

Although Doubs' description went partly over his head, Michael still understood that Fannie had the mind and heart of a child, true to his appearance.

Fannie fretted at the exposure of his secret. But Doubs could not look any more jolly.

"Fannie, you see, is only interested in girls about the same age as his current body. It only *looks* ingenuously innocent, but doesn't it become simply *scandalous* when you remember that he's actually a five hundred-year-old man?"

"Q-quit it! Quit teasing me!" Fannie complained, in tears.

Doubs chuckled and looked out the window once more. Spotting yet another vampire, he ordered the driver to stop the car.

But this time, Michael did not see anyone outside the window.

Ignoring Michael's confusion, Doubs poked his head outside and addressed someone near the ground.

"Care for a ride, Wol?"

From out the window—quite close to the ground—came a pleasant voice.

"Are you trying to aggravate me? I am a proud wolf. I'll not sully my honor by being *driven* to the destination."

"I see. Please excuse my manners." Doubs said with a slight bow, and ordered the driver to continue.

'A wolf vampire who can talk like a human? Wonder what he looks like.' Michael thought excitedly, and turned round to glance out the window.

Trotting elegantly down the road behind them was a lone chihuahua.

"..."

Michael was lost for words. Gesturing for silence, Doubs whispered, "ah, for your reference, the word 'dog' is taboo around Wol. He is always adamant on calling himself a wolf."

"Mr. Wol can be pretty stubborn."

"Of course, there *is* a true wolf vampire in the Organization, but so many mock him and call him a werewolf that the word 'wolf' is taboo around him. Such a hopeless headache."

"Hee hee. Talk about being blind to yourself." Fannie snickered, sounding a little more at ease now that they had moved on to a different topic. Doubs shook his head at the sight.

"You should speak for yourself, Fannie. You may mirror a human in appearance, but—"

"Mr. Doubs, no!" Fannie cried, clambering over Michael's lap and reaching out to cover Doubs' mouth.

Suddenly, his sleeve shook.

There was a zipper on the side of Fannie's T-shirt, too randomly placed to be anything but a fashion statement. But at that moment, the zipper opened and something that looked suspiciously like the leg of a crustacean slid out, crossed Michael's line of sight, and pushed down Doubs' neck.

A second later, the boy's pale hand reached Doubs' mouth and forced it shut.

"How many times do I have to tell you, Mr. Doubs?! You're not supposed to tell humans about my real form! If a girl ever found out what I looked like, she'd run away screaming!"

"Uh."

Not sure how to react, Michael poked the mysterious, carapace-covered leg that stretched out before his eyes.

"Ah."

Finally realizing what he had done, Fannie hurriedly pulled back the leg into his T-shirt and stared up at Michael.

"D-did you see?"

"I'll pretend I didn't."

"That's fine, then. Thank you." The boy sighed, relieved. Michael was reminded of a friend he left back on the island.

'He's starting to remind me more and more of Val. ...Now that I think about it, I wonder what Val and Selim are doing right about now.'

Although he hadn't been away from Growerth for more than a few days, Michael was already struck by nostalgia. He blankly glanced out the window, and as he lost himself in thought, his homesickness began to fade.

'Oh...'

Remembering the vampires on either side of him and the chihuahua from earlier, Michael realized that those otherworldly beings made him more comfortable than scared.

'This place isn't all that different from Waldstein Castle. Though it is a little lonely without Ferret.'

†

Inside the Mars country house.

By the time Michael and company arrived on the manor doorstep, many vampires were already inside.

Of the Colors alone there were approximately a hundred.

And including their direct subordinates and the servants who worked at the Mars manor, there were well over three hundred vampires, humans, and werewolves inside the building.

But the Mars family's country house refused to be dwarfed by such numbers.

The living room alone was over a thousand square meters wide, and the manor contained fifty rooms.

Most humans were first surprised by the fact that it was a rather small manor by country house standards, but that shock was nothing compared to what they experienced the moment they stepped inside in person.

Displaying all the extravagance and elegance of the world, the massive entrance could probably fit gigantic stone statues. The golden chandelier shone brightly in a perfect match, turning even the most ostentatious glitter into a warm glow.

The ceiling was over twenty meters high, but the majestic mural that covered the walls turned the ceiling from a functional structure to a man-made sky. The chamber could easily be mistaken for another world altogether.

The rooms that were built all around the central chamber were also breathtaking. Stepping into one was, rather than entering an art museum, like entering a piece of art itself.

The walls and ceilings were designed differently in each room. From the biggest features to the tiniest details, no corner had been hastily shaped. Even a postcard-sized piece cut out of the wall might pass for an artistic masterpiece.

The manor's hall was the size of an elementary school's gymnasium, coordinated with wooden textures and soft golden colors.

The dining hall was built to host over a hundred guests at once, at a scale too massive to fit in an ordinary mansion.

The parlor was circular in shape, designed like the lobby of a five-star hotel.

The bedrooms were furnished with silken veils and sparkling ornaments to soothe its occupants to sleep.

The kitchens, though without the eye-catching splendor of the rooms, were equipped to efficiently provide large quantities of food. It was worth noting that the ceiling was higher than the height of the door to prevent the heat from the food from lingering near the floor.

The great spiral staircases, their very arcs an expression of beauty.

A billiards room that coaxed all sorts of nostalgia and ambition from those who stepped inside.

The bathrooms, shower-centered and not so different from those in ordinary houses, still showcased elegance with the ceramic vases displayed by the bathtubs.

One place that stood out even more amidst the list of rooms in the majestic country house was a place known as the long gallery.

A long gallery was a feature of many country houses. They couldn't quite be called 'rooms', but that distinction was the reason visitors could experience the splendor of the aristocracy in this place.

It was a space the width of two cars, stretching on for dozens of meters.

It was not a hallway; a long gallery was a room and a facility in its own right. It was used as an indoor garden of sorts, to be strolled around during bad weather. It was also a recreation room, decorated according to the hobbies of the owner of the country house. Some nobles even held fashion shows amongst themselves here, even setting up chairs for audiences.

Depending on the owner's preferences, a long gallery could be an art museum filled with a collection of paintings and other works, a library with bookshelves covering fifty-meter high walls, or sometimes an ordinary parlor.

Naturally, the Mars family's country house also had a long gallery fitted to the tastes of its owner.

As a result, it earned a place at the top of a list of the most idiosyncratic rooms. Not only in the Mars manor, but probably among every country house in the world.

That was because the gallery was filled with—

"...What is this."

Caldimir Aleksandrov, the Blue Flow of Blood, was guided into the long gallery by a servant as he made his way to announce his arrival. But the moment he set foot inside, he was seized by a strange sense of incongruity.

At first glance, the long gallery showcased artworks on the left side by the entrance, and seemingly infinite bookshelves on the right. Lined up before the bookshelves were luxury tables and chairs, lending the room the air of a relaxed library.

But the incongruity in the air continued prodding at his instincts.

There was but a single window in the long gallery, and even that was shuttered closed. But that was understandable. Though the vampire who owned the premises was immune to sunlight, many of the visitors were not. It was a natural, considerate gesture.

But that was not what bothered Caldimir.

Sensing that there was something fundamentally different about the gallery, Caldimir fixed his glasses and turned to the frames hanging on the wall.

The frames were crafted with masterful intricacy. Even if they were empty, they would be works of art in their own right. At the same time, they did not at all distract from the contents inside—a perfect mix of luxury and humility.

But,

"Hm...?"

The incongruity was emanating from the pictures inside the frames.

"What is this picture? No... Is this a poster?"

Inside the frames were colorful posters with all kinds of logos and title images adorning them. It was certainly an understandable way of showcasing a hobby, though rather out of place on the walls of a noble's manor.

At first, Caldimir thought the posters were advertising films or plays. But upon closer inspection, he found posters featuring art straight out of comics and cartoons, and even art styles that used 3-D CGI.

"..."

"These are video game posters. Half of them are Japanese. And look what we have here. Instruction manuals for arcade games."

Arriving with a sudden comment was a female vampire who joined the confused Caldimir at the entrance.

"...Video games?"

"Correct. Admittedly, I don't know much about them."

It was Laetitia Gitarin Aztanduja the Orange Magic Lantern, a woman dressed in a flattering military uniform. With a piercing-cold look, she addressed Caldimir.

"You've never stayed long at this mansion, but even you should know of her hobbies. The biggest gaming enthusiast of vampirekind. Likely also in the top ten percentile among humans."

"...Of all the worthless... Putting up posters like works of art? I feel sorry for the room."

"Is that so? The contents matter little so long as they are valuable to the owner. If nothing else, the family head is happy with this place."

"So where *is* she? I have to show her my face, even if I don't feel like sucking up..." Caldimir muttered. Laetitia chuckled and pointed at a corner of the room.

"Furthest table in the back, if you really want to go there and remind yourself of getting on her bad side after shutting her out of a conference."

"Th-that's a thing of the past! Gold, Pearl, and—for some reason—Yellow already beat me senseless! Now that I've broken even, I'm justified in going to speak to her—"

"Getting wordy again, Caldimir. I see you're scared already."

"..."

Silently clenching his teeth, Caldimir turned his back on Laetitia, walking away. Perhaps his heavy gait on the red carpet floor spoke for his anxiety.

After undergoing the rare experience of walking fifty meters without turning in a single room on private property, Caldimir looked down upon the mismatched group sitting at a table about ten meters away.

There, he glimpsed a flash of red quite different from the tone of the carpet.

'G-Gerhardt was here too?!'

At the end of Caldimir's gaze sat a creature who stood out like a sore thumb even among his fellow vampires.

A logic-defying sight was spread out over a chair and part of the table.

It was a mass of striking red fluid—a large quantity of blood, squirming in the air in defiance of gravity and surface tension.

Though it had been sitting on a chair in a humanoid form with its elbows on the table, it quickly noticed Caldimir's arrival and shifted. Taking on new forms in midair, it wove itself into sentences in Caldimir's native language before his eyes.

[My word, if it isn't Caldimir. What brings you here, old friend? It's quite unusual to see you arrive at a conference half a day before it is due to begin. A rare occasion indeed!]

"Speak for yourself. I see you also have more than enough time on your hands, Gerhardt."

Gerhardt von Waldstein.

That was the name of the liquid vampire.

He was the adoptive father of Relic and Ferret, as well as the former Lord of Waldstein Castle.

When emperors still ruled the country, Gerhardt was granted the title of viscount—a title that could not exist in Germany—and governed the island of Growerth. From the shadows he had supported and sponsored the budding relationships between humans and vampires.

At this point, he had passed down his position to Relic and returned to the Organization as one of its officers.

As Caldimir looked on scornfully, Gerhardt squarely replied,

[That is, I must say, an incorrect observation. I was merely making efficient use of the time we have left before the conference. And I continue to send for more information. As the topic of this conference gives no leeway for laughter or joy, I am making an attempt to remain in the world of normalcy, at least until the time comes.]

"What are you people *doing*, anyway?" Caldimir wondered, casting a glance over the table. Sitting there were some familiar faces, and a woman he had never met before,

First, Caldimir addressed one of the vampires he knew—a quiet-looking girl.

"Well. How are you, Silver-wheel Stage?"

"Oh, Mr Caldimir... I'm terribly sorry, but I'm a little occupied at the moment... I don't think I can greet you proper- oh no!"

The girl with the moniker 'Silver-wheel Stage' quickly turned and nodded at Caldimir, but panicked and immediately returned to the object in her hands.

She was not the only one occupied in that fashion. Every vampire seated at the table was glued to the electronic devices in their hands. Even the liquid vampire, Gerhardt, was expertly pressing buttons in sequences.

The vampires seemed to be holding portable game systems. Tiny animated characters were moving around the screens.

"..."

Thrust into a sense of alienation, Caldimir cleared his throat and called to the entire table.

"I'll bite. Just what are you people up to?"

Gerhardt's words of blood responded, even as he continued to focus on the game.

[Ah, my deepest apologies, Caldimir. We've just encountered some enemies; I suspect we will be tied up for some time. Under normal circumstances we would stop what we are doing to greet you properly. But some members of our party are participating over the internet; it would be terribly inconsiderate for us to stop without warning them. I am sure Miss Romy

also wishes she could properly greet you, so I ask that you take a merciful stance toward us.]

The girl called Romy hurriedly looked back and forth between Caldimir and her screen.

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Caldimir!"

Beneath the veil of her short hair, Romy was half in tears. Her clothes were made of the most expensive fabrics in the room, and her bracelets were adorned with clearly-expensive gemstones.

But there was one strange thing about her dress.

On her back were a large, realistic pair of bat-wings that flapped as though they were a part of her very body.

Although they were not very incongruous on the back of a vampire, the wings were actually fake; they were a custom-made item made of special materials. The wings were likely extremely expensive.

But no one thought her appearance strange.

At least, no one in the manor did.

Though the girl—Romy Mars—appeared to be little more than a shy teenager, she was actually the owner of the estate and the head of the incredibly affluent Mars family.

She was also an officer of the Organization, connected to the color silver, and a financial supporter of the group alongside Gold.

She was a former human who had stopped aging centuries ago. Once every few decades she would put on different clothes and makeup to introduce herself as 'the new family head', never showing herself in public otherwise.

But there was one part of human society she made an exception for.

"...Gerhardt. What is this game you're obsessed with?"

[Ah, this would be the portable version of 'Underground Gun Mania'. It is a game where you take on the role of a vampire hunter seeking out vampires who have hidden themselves among the human populace. A rather entertaining game, to be perfectly honest.]

"Wh-what?!" Caldimir squawked, blanching. "In other words, this is a game about our enemies! What entertainment could you possibly find in this piece of—"

"Mr. Caldimir."

An ice-cold voice cut across the table.

Sitting there was Romy, whose apologetic embarrassment was nowhere to be found. Instead, she was glaring at Caldimir with a chilling smile.

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you this, but... you are old enough to distinguish between games and reality, no?"

"...Ah... Uh... Wha... What? Why am I the one being scolded here?" Caldimir groaned, but Romy's smile grew yet more pronounced. With a chill running down his spine, Caldimir found himself looking away.

Video games.

Though Romy Mars had no interest in films, novels, cartoons, or comic books, video games were another story. She generously poured time and money into the hobby. Romy also made sure to obtain films, comics, and cartoons that were connected to video games in some way.

Although not even Laetitia noticed, posters were not the only video game paraphernalia displayed in the long gallery. The bookshelves that filled a corner of the room were stuffed with nothing but strategy guides, concept artbooks, and comics and novels related to video game works.

Romy also took her hobby one step further.

She would commission costumes of her favorite video game characters to professionals, or she would make them herself. Then she would wear the costumes in daily life. It was an act commonly known as 'cosplay', something she took great pleasure in. To those who knew nothing about games (and, admittedly, even to those who knew them), her manner of dress could be incredibly strange to behold.

However, she spent so much resources on her cosplay and she was so removed from reality that other vampires who shared her hobby began to call her 'a 2-D character in the 3-D world'.

Today, she was dressed in a Gothic dress with bat wings, a relatively sensible outfit for a rich vampire. But normally, she would go around wearing *qipaos*, *kunoichi*¹ costumes, and even bikini-style armor or Japanese schoolgirl uniforms. Her manner of dress changed by the day.

But that alone made Romy little more than a rich young woman with unusual hobbies. Yet for some reason, Caldimir twitched nervously.

"M-Miss Romy. Is that even a question? I'm just worried. A-after all, we've got a certain sicko named Garde who can't tell reality apart from games."

"..."

The occupants of the table froze.

Garde was the officer to whom the color black had been assigned. They were a vampire whose entire body was covered in black bandages like a mummy. They specialized in subjugating corpses, and possessed the power to control corpses at the cellular level to make them their slaves. It was rumored that they had turned a video game into reality by

¹ A female ninja.

resurrecting soldiers from both sides of a war as zombies and forcing them to repeat the slaughter in which they had died.

"It's because of dogs like that that we vampires get framed as monsters. It's also why we get incidents like *this*. why can't Garde just learn from me and live like an upright person?" Caldimir wondered, criticizing Garde in order to avert the full brunt of Romy's anger.

But the first to react was the lone member whom Caldimir did not recognize.

The scantily-dressed woman flashed him a seductive smile.

"Is there something the matter, Miss?" He asked confidently, thinking that she was a subordinate of Romy or another vampire. But the moment the woman spoke, Caldimir's grin went rigid.

"You're really brave today, aren't you? You are."

"?!"

The voice definitely belonged to a woman. But when she spoke again, her body began to change.

"...Toughen."

By some unknown power, the woman's voluptuous body suddenly changed to a mass of muscle. The fat over her chest disappeared, and an Adam's Apple jutted out of the neck as the vampire took on the form of a man.

Transforming into a somewhat androgynous but chilling man, the vampire pulled out his suitcase from by his feet and withdrew rolls of bandages. He wrapped them around his face.

Then, another word.

"...Wither."

At that moment, the tight, muscular frame rapidly dried out, giving way to the form of a bone-skinny person.

Having finally returned to their original voice, Garde the Black put on an eerily cheerful grin under their bandages and turned to their party members at the table.

"Can I come back in a bit? Can I come back?"

Even as they asked, one of their hands was already holding Caldimir's arm in a vice-like grip.

"Y-you... Gaaaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrrddde... Gah... Ugh..."

Listening to Caldimir's agonized groans, Garde's party members reacted with utter calm.

[Ah, there's little left of this boss's hit points now. I'm quite certain we'll be able to manage ourselves.]



"Um... Garde, would you mind terribly if I asked you to take it to the garden? I'd prefer to keep all my posters intact..."

"We gotta split up the loot, so hurry on back, you hear?"

Caldimir screamed in rage and despair at the vampires' reactions.

"Y-yyouuuuuuu..."

He was soon dragged bodily out of the long gallery.

Those left behind continued to focus on their game, returning to idle chatter.

"Anyway, is Garde a man or a woman?"

"Apparently not even they remember anymore..."

"Come to think of it, aren't we missing a trickster here?"

"Doubs says he's running late. Something about bringing a guest along."

"Speaking of which, that asshole's been giving away our email addresses to Garde without permission. I don't care myself, but that's pretty damned rude."

"Meow."

However, one among the party members remained silent.

Gerhardt.

Because everyone assumed that he was keeping quiet so as to not distract anyone with his written words, no one realized that part of his body was slithering outside in a stream of red.

†

Several minutes later, the courtyard of the Mars family country house.

[Are you all right, Caldimir?]

"Urgh... Gerhardt...?"

Caldimir was sprawled out on the ground, having been beaten to a pulp by Garde.

As Laetitia reveled in the atrocity, the stream of blood wove itself into words. Caldimir smiled bitterly.

"...Abandoned your game, I see."

[Not at all. I am both playing and speaking to you at once.]

"...Talented bastard..."

[It has been apparent to me for some time now, Caldimir—perhaps you should refrain from condescending over others for the purpose of elevating yourself. That will lead to neither praise nor support from our brethren.]

Finally noticing the viscount's presence, Laetitia stepped in between them, looking down upon Caldimir.

"Don't waste your breath, Gerhard. You know Caldimir has been this way from the beginning."

[Hm...]

"And that's why we founded the Organization in the first place. To cover one another's weaknesses. Did you forget?" Laetitia snickered. Gerhard squirmed and responded in a font conveying nostalgia.

[Not for a moment. How could I ever forget?]

Caldimir snorted between gasps.

"Heh... Are you quite certain? You... you've already left us once..."

[I shall remind you again, Caldimir, but I have no regrets about leaving the Organization. Although I do sometimes wonder if there could have been another way.] Gerhard replied, trembling sentimentally.

[Ah, yes. When we first founded the Organization... We were young. We all were. Yes. So very young. You, Laetitia, myself... Melhilm, Dorothy... and the brothers.

[Now that I look back on it, perhaps our meeting with them was what started the Organization.]

†

Centuries ago, somewhere in Eastern Europe.

"Your existence is itself a sin."

With those words echoing in their minds, two boys sprinted through the woods in the middle of the night.

They ran and ran. They ran without caring where.

Without a single flame to guide them, they ran through the pitch-black woods.

They were both about fifteen years of age.

Because they looked completely identical, it was easy to see that they were twins, or perhaps part of a set of triplets or quadruplets.

"Big brother! How much further... How much further do we have to run?!"

"...Until those bastards stop hunting us!"

They sped through the mountains without so much as stumbling, perhaps because they could see well in the dark.

The younger brother responded by looking back without slowing down.

Scattered before his eyes in the darkness were countless trembling torches.

Glowing flames were clustered in little groups, turning the multitudes into one large figure.

If they were lined up in a row, they would probably appear like a serpent or a dragon.

But the flames were dotted along the mountain, far behind the boys. Because they had no specific monster to elude, they were pressed by an inescapable unknown in the blackness.

The lights,

Lights lights lights lights lights lights lights lights lights

Trembling trembling trembling trembling as they lithely groped through the dark, the glowing fires despair incarnate for the fleeing children.

Clinging viscously to the torches were voices of resentment that shook the very mountains with their groans.

'We must not let them escape.'

'We must not let them live.'

'If they escape, we will be killed.'

'If we do not kill, we will be killed.'

'Kill them. Kill them. Kill them.'

'Do not show them mercy just because they are children.'

'Kill them because they are children.'

'Before they mature into greater threats.'

'Destroy them. Destroy them. Destroy them.'

'Destruction. Bring them destruction.'

It was an eerie scene.

Chasing after the brothers were humans in ragged clothing. They were not battle-hardened men like knights or bandits.

They were common people from ordinary lives, who had rushed into the mountains in the rags they were wearing earlier.

But the torches, sickles, axes, hunting crossbows, and the terror, hatred, and disgust in their eyes turned the people into a pack of madmen.

"Oh no... this is bad... Big brother! There's... there's more of them now..."

"Don't waste time looking at them! Just keep running!"

Spurred by the older brother, the younger brother continued to run as he wept.

The brothers were at an advantage when it came to climbing the mountain. They knew their superior speed well.

But that was not hope enough to assuage their fears.

'So what if we're faster?'

'I... I don't know if we could outrun them.'

Slowly but surely, the scattered torches were beginning to cover the entire mountain.

Would they even be able to flee across the mountain at this point?

The flames at their backs swallowed the mountain slope like a giant wave.

'What if... those fires cover the other side too?'

The same worry gripped the brothers' minds at once.

But they did not dare to voice their fears.

Because they felt as though, the moment they did, their fears would become reality.

"Big brother... I... I can't...!"

"C'mon!"

Grabbing the younger brother's hand before he could collapse, the older brother pulled him along and continued to run.

Encouraged by the action, the younger brother clenched his teeth and put strength into his legs again.

"Damn it... Why...? Why do they have to come after us...? What did we ever do to them...?"

"What did we do? ...We were *born*. They said... it's a sin..."

The older brother pressed on, biting his lip.

Between his bleeding lips stuck out a pair of unusually long incisors.

They brothers wondered if it was their fate to continue running for all of time.

'No... Maybe that'd be better than getting caught.' The older brother thought.

But at that moment, a pair of hands reached out in the middle of the knobbly path and grabbed each of the brothers by the napes of their necks.

"...!"

"Big brother!"

The one responsible for so easily ending the brothers' desperate escape was an extremely tall, rugged woman dressed like a bandit.

"Damn it... Let go! Put us down!"

"Y-you bastard! Let my brother go!"

The younger brother cried for his brother's release, even though he had also been captured.

They struggled with all their might, but the woman did not so much as budge.

'Why doesn't she even flinch...?'

The brothers panicked.

They knew that they were incredibly strong compared to humans. After all, that was the reason they were being chased by their own neighbors in the first place.

But their superhuman strength did not so much as faze the large woman. It felt as though they had been wrapped against an iron tree.

The woman sighed.

"You've got to cool your heads. We've come to *help* you."

From behind her emerged several men and women, also dressed like bandits.

It was then that the boys noticed something strange.

Unlike the villagers giving them chase, this group of people were not carrying any source of light.

The group was lastly joined by a man. He cracked his neck and turned to the tall woman.

"Madame Job. What'd Mr. Gerhardt say, ma'am?"

"We've got free rein, he says. He means we've got to save the lads. Young Masters Gerhardt and Melhilm'll scare off the humans."

The woman, speaking with an unusual accent, laughed heartily. She hoisted the boys higher into the air and sat them down on her shoulders.

Not a second later, her body expanded. The brothers felt soft fur on their skin.

Transforming into a gigantic humanoid wolf, the woman leaned forward slightly before kicking off the ground with the force of a cannon, leaping into the sky.

At that moment, everything the brothers saw became one with the wind as the world rushed past them at incredible speed.

Each time one of her feet touched the ground, there was a noise like a peal of thunder. The boys realized that they had been saved by a being whose power they could not challenge—a power that wiped clean even their fear and anxiety.

"Wh-what do we do, big brother?"

"...What *can* we do? Let's... stay put."

In contrast to the panicked younger brother, the older twin calmly decided to follow the strange group of people.

It was a turning point in the lives of the brothers.

Several years later, they went on to found a certain organization alongside the master of the werewolves who rescued them. A vampire named Gerhardt von Waldstein.

An Organization made of vampires, by vampires, for vampires.

A group that, to humans, looked like nothing short of a band of demons.

But for the brothers, at least, the Organization brought them salvation.

Time passed.

†

Present day. The entrance of the Mars family country house.

"It's been a while since we had a conference at Romy's place."

"It sure has."

A smile-happy caucasian man and a bespectacled Asian man were standing at the doors.

Although their eye and hair colors were different, their physical features were identical. It was obvious that they were twins with different coloring. The caucasian was dressed like a typical young man from America, and had a gun holstered at his side. The Asian was dressed in a well-cut suit, and for some reason had a bamboo sword at his side.

The younger brother—Yellow Bridgestone—slapped his older brother Aiji Ishibashi on the back.

"Since it's Mr. Gerhardt calling the party this time, I'll bet we'll get a buncha unfamiliar faces."

"Yes. ...He's been away from the Organization for a long time, but Sir Gerhardt is still on excellent terms with many of the officers. And I'm happy to see that he's reconciled with Sir Melhilm as well."

"Heh. That's 'cause he's one of the founders. Just the fact that he's around makes everyone feel better. A lot better than that asshole Caldimir calling the shots."

Not knowing that Caldimir was currently lying in a heap in the courtyard, the brothers opened the front doors and stepped into the entrance hall.

"Whoa. She's got paintings on the ceiling? ...Is this a church? I'm outta here."

"Don't be rude to the hostess. And look. This isn't religious artwork."

As they looked upon the unimaginably opulent interior, the younger brother made snide comments and the older brother chastised him.

The vampires in the entrance hall reacted to their arrival.

"Oh... Ohhh! Thank god you're here, Ishibashi-san! Finally, someone who speaks Japanese! Oh... you have no idea how many years I've lost off my life, not understanding a word of what these people are saying!"

A Japanese man in a grey suit ran up to the brothers, gingerly rubbing his stomach and looking quite weather-worn.

"Ah, Satō-san. ...Hm? Are we the only Japanese members here today?"

"No, well... You see, Hayami-kun the Varigated and Morikawa-san the Vermillion are in the guest rooms. But it's a bit awkward for me to speak to Hayami-kun, and Morikawa-san is a bit difficult to approach because he's surrounded by *miko*²... Ichimatsu-san the Checkered, Kochō-san the Multitude, and Yamada-san the Pearl haven't arrived yet. So... the only other Japanese member here was..."

At the end of Satō's gaze was a Japanese man in a tuxedo, his hair slicked back and a plain office tie around his neck. He was standing perfectly upright, pontificating passionately.

"In other words, humanity must find new direction and step toward the future! How much longer must we live in fear of yet another oil crisis? The world must advance beyond the chains of the past. From the fetters of limited natural resources, to the regulated use of the new energy source known as *blood*! Yes! Vote Kibamori Ryōma today, for the realization of this ideal! For nine-hour work days, and for all work shifts to be fixed at night hours! Vote Kibamori Ryōma!"

² A shrine maiden who works at a Shinto shrine.

"...Oh... Kibamori the Amber..."

"Why in the world is he making an election speech in a place like this?! And before that, have you heard the news? How he created the 'Vampire Party of Japan' and announced his candidacy?! Yes, the internet sees him as a laughingstock, and the media doesn't even report on him because they think he's insane! But he's beginning to gain steam, even though he began with only a hundred votes! Just imagine what might happen if he gets elected! And do you know what he said to me? 'Would you like to run alongside me', he asked. Urgh... e-excuse me a minute."

Grimacing, Satō clutched his stomach, took out a packet of digestives, and tipped the powdered medication into his mouth.

"P-please calm down. People with common sense are hard to come by in the Organization. If you happened to collapse of stress, the Organization will only grow more irrational."

Petitioning his fellow officer with a show of sympathy, Aiji turned his gaze at the other vampires.

Suddenly, a colorful parrot flew up to the brothers and squawked,

"You're food! You're food!"

The parrot then found its perch atop a vampire with a turban and a goatee, who seemed to be of Indian descent.

"Ah... My word. To think I would gaze upon two members of Rainbow while I still lived... This is the guidance of karma. *Namaste*."

The man was behaving so overtly Indian that he came right around to not looking so authentic. Yellow prodded the parrot's beak with his index finger and cried,

"Hey, hey! Charulata! What happened to the two hundred bucks you owe me?"

"...It seems we are connected by a negative flow of karma from lives past... This also is the will of the gods... *Namonamo*..."

"The hell are you saying?! I'm talkin' money here! And what exactly is that three thousand-year old past life you always yak about?" Yellow demanded, shaking the man by the collar. The suspicious man named Charulata looked off into the distance, and replied in an enlightened voice.

"My past life I spent as a *bishōjo* of impeccable karma. I handed extremely incredible sutras to the monk Xuanzang³, and also was a beloved idol of a maid cafe in Akihabara... *Moemoe*..."

"You ain't actually Indian, are ya?! You're just a tanned Japanese guy!"

"Hmm... I have no idea what you are talking about. Well, I shall see you again in our next life. *Kob kun krab*."

³ The monk in the 16th century Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*.

"Argh! You're pissing me off, asshole!"

Ignoring his younger brother—who continued to argue with Charulata in a strange show of diligence—Aiji quietly walked toward the center of the entrance hall.

"Attendance really has gone up this time..."

All around him were vampires of incredible eccentricity.

"Superior officer sighted! Men! Salute!"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

A man in a military uniform called out orders, and the skeletons around him saluted Aiji loudly.

"Someone... Won't someone love me? Only by true love's kiss will I return to being a frog!"

A remarkably handsome man was attempting to court the female vampires around him. But the women only gave him dubious responses. Although the man claimed that he was actually a frog vampire, no one had ever kissed him, so the truth remained unknown.

"All you have to do is believe. In the fact of your own sins, and in the Lord. And the fact of your salvation."

A vampire was selling indulgences from a certain faith to fellow Organization members.

"Grrrr... Grrrrrrrowl..."

There was a black woman conversing with a gigantic lion, her wet black hair shimmering. When she caught sight of Aiji, she and the lion flashed him a smile. Thinking that he saw the same sentiment in the lion's look as the one the parrot had said to him earlier, Aiji forced himself to smile back and turned away.

"Ah, Mr. Ishibashi! Pale as ever, I see. You need more training!"

A smiling, tanned vampire with glinting white teeth, wearing a sleeveless undershirt. He would tell vampires weak against sunlight that their problem could be resolved with training, and insisted that they get suntans.

Chaos.

Chaos.

A world of chaos was squirming in the entrance hall.

At first glance, it looked like a costume party or the back room of a theater where young artists were rehearsing for their performances. The more 'normal' of the vampires were staggering nervously like Satō, or had already gone to their rooms, unwilling to be treated like the more unusual members of the Organization.

"..."

Although Aiji did not dislike the idiosyncratic characters, there was no telling what might happen if he lingered with them too long. He wanted to go to another room and speak to Gerhardt, but being a superior officer meant that he could not neglect greeting the members who came up to him.

"Ah, you are here. ...So much commotion for a group of officers, don't you agree?"

Offering Aiji a handshake of sorts was a monster covered in rusted skin. He was like an alien out of a movie, minus the humanoid aspect. A voice was coming from somewhere in his body—a mixture of centipede, beetle, construction machinery, and predatory dinosaur—as it creaked in time to his voice.

"It seems we've got an attendance rate of about eighty percent. Void, Cetus, and Deep Deep Deep Blue aren't here, but that's only natural... Of course, I suppose Void will get into our heads whether we like it or not."

"Yes. But it's really unusual to see so many at a conference."

"Of course. Gerhardt is part of the reason, but even those who wouldn't normally attend have probably come because they could spend time at the Mars family's country house. They're after the food, no doubt. Gluttonous creatures."

The machine-like vampire seemed to be laughing, his teeth clacking together as though ready to gnaw through iron.

"Yes. You're right."

After exchanging a few words with Tromm Ed Romans the Dark Grey, Aiji walked over to his brother, who seemed to have finally wrapped up his conversation with Charulata.

"I'm exhausted already."

"Seriously? Gimme a break. How're you gonna stand Mirror's sarcasm or Iridescent's tricks? ...Then again, I gotta admit the attendance rate's kind of scaring me."

"The more members gather, the stranger this Organization becomes... Especially when the members who don't usually attend decide to show up."

"Which is why *normal* people like us get to be part of Rainbow." The younger brother said confidently. Aiji sighed and shook his head.

"In that sense, Satō Ichirō is a better fit for your position... Although I suppose that's from a human perspective of normalcy."

Aiji glanced over at the Japanese man he had spoken to earlier. Satō was a slight distance away, coerced into tasting a strange dish by a vampire dressed like a chef. As soon as he took a bite, Satō began to flail on the floor—perhaps there was garlic in the food.

"Another failure... And I was so sure I'd excised the garlic while retaining the taste..."

As the cook sighed and hung his head, officers who were not weak to garlic rushed over and began to wolf down his food.

Watching from the sidelines, Aiji treated the scene as though he had nothing to do with it.

"I wonder what humans who know us only from movies would think of this."

"Who knows? Vampires who act like vampires mostly get offed before they join. Either that, or they're crazy strong bastards from one of the Seven Clans. I guess we really are a complete mess. Mr. Gerhardt is made of blood, for crying out loud!"

"If we're discussing vampires who don't fit the norm, I would pick out Sir Gerhardt and the Giemsa Stain."

"The Giem-who now?" Yellow asked.

"The white blood cell vampires that were developed by Sir Melhilm. I believe he's still trying to find out if they have a sense of self or not. But if you look at how they absorb humans' red blood cells and turn the host's body into something like a zombie, Giemsa Stain is probably more like a vampire than Sir Gerhardt."

"Aaaaand the Organization finally turns into a netherworld. Or some sort of alien council. Wouldn't be surprised if we get a buncha men in black at the door armed with penlights and laser pistols."

"I admit it scares me to think that's not so impossible after all." Aiji said with a laugh, unusual for the stoic man.

Although Aiji's laugh was bitter, Yellow seemed to be happy with the first genuine smile his brother had shown in a long time. He decided to continue joking around.

But at that point, a cacophonous bell began to chime in the entrance hall.

All eyes were on the source of the sound. There was a man dressed like a butler at the top of the steps, bowing politely at the guests.

For some reason, there were a pair of ski goggles over his face. His eyes were faintly visible under the darkened glass.

His eyes were incredibly cold—it was as though spheres of dry ice had been stuffed into his sockets.

"Honored guests..."

The man, a butler of the Mars family, bowed once more and continued with sophistication.

"It is my greatest pleasure to greet you here in this incredibly humble home."

'...Hm?'

Aiji sensed a strange incongruity in the butler's speech, delivered in English. But before he could confirm any of his suspicions, the butler continued solemnly.

"Dinner will be served in the hall, but it is naturally a showing of Lady Romy's divinely generous goodwill toward you that reaches deeper than the mantle itself. Please keep this in mind and move to the hall quietly. And to prevent the air in this manor from being infected by your impoverished breathing, please take care to breathe as little as possible. Remember that your poverty is already as good as pollu-GRK!"

The polite, yet highly insulting speech was cut short with a sharp cry.

Standing behind the man was a girl—the head of the family, Romy Mars—holding a giant sword, face pale, and covering the butler's mouth as she desperately clung to his shoulders.

"J-Jodo! How improper! I, um, everyone! I'm terribly sorry for this! I will deny Jodo his next meal, so please... please pretend you heard nothing...!" The girl in bat cosplay cried, half in tears.

As everyone wondered how they should react, the butler easily wrenched himself out of his master's hold and bellowed, eyes wide.

"No, Milady! If you stay here any longer, you will be infected by their poverty! Poverty is a disease that can only be cured with wealth! Your humble servant will use as much wealth as it takes to keep this rabble away from you, so please do not fret!"

"Please be quiet, Jodo! A-and it's incredibly rude to wear those goggles in front of the guests! Please take them off this instant!"

The cosplaying vampire chastised the butler with a mix of hesitation and indignation. But the butler responded with a strangely confident expression.

"Heh heh heh... These goggles are not merely for the purpose of avoiding UV rays, Milady. They protect me from going blind from the sight of these impoverished masses. The only one these eyes of mine look upon, Milady, is you!" He cried, whipping off his goggles and gazing upon Romy.

"Umm... Jodo? You're scaring me."

His expression unchanging, the man put on the goggles once more and declared to the vampires below:

"...And thus, I am unable to remove these goggles until the day of my death!"

"Like hell."

Crunch.

With the voice of one annoyed vampire came a black projectile that bit off the butler's solar plexus.

A gigantic bat had been launched from the gun Yellow had drawn.

"Urgh...! Y-you *pauper*! How dare you use such a cost-efficient attack?!"

"J-Jodo! Why can't you just apologize to them?!"

Watching the butler struggle against the bat, Aiji wearily turned to his brother.

"Vampires these days are so colorful that I'm starting to get worried."

Yellow snorted.

"That butler's a human, big brother."

"What?"

"Apparently he used to be a Hunter. Then he fell hard for Romy. If you think about it, there's a lotta sick bastards out there—vampires *and* humans. Hah!"

"..."

'*What is the world coming to...?*' Aiji began to wonder, when all of a sudden a deafening noise began to rock the entrance hall.

'...*What?*'

The sound was coming from somewhere far away.

He quickly realized that it was coming from a helicopter in flight.

At first, Aiji assumed that it was just passing by; but what helicopter would pass through this vast piece of private property in the middle of the night?

Perhaps it was an attack led by humans, or vampires unaffiliated with the Organization.

Keeping the possibilities in mind, Aiji focused his senses on the sound of the helicopter.

"Oh! That must be Mr. Gardastance!" Romy said with a clap of the hands, instantly dispelling Aiji's worries. "He contacted me to see if the helipads would be available today. Oh, but he also asked if he could use two adjacent ones at once. I wonder why..."

Gardastance.

He was the officer to whom the color gold had been assigned, and was the only vampire in the Organization whose wealth dwarfed those of the Mars or Waldstein families.

But why in the world did he choose to arrive by helicopter, risking attracting attention? Wouldn't it make trouble if the former chairman of the Gardastance Group were to be seen on Mars property and reported to gossip or business magazines?

Mulling over the questions in his head, Aiji pictured the outcomes of his fears and realized just how much of a risk Gold must have taken.

Determining that it would be best to hear him out in person, Aiji and the other vampires stepped outside through the front doors.

"Is that... a jumbo jet?"

"N-no... that's... don't tell me that's a helicopter?!"

The vampires could not hide their shock at the helicopter illuminated by the blinding lights.

The vehicle was rather unorthodox for a helicopter, starting with its incredible size.

The silhouette was large enough to rival a jumbo jet.

The vehicle, more suited to a public airport than a privately owned helipad, slowly hovered over the ground as it descended.

Attached to either wing were gigantic rotors, chopping through the air and sending gusts of wind blowing around them.

Vampires who were weak to intense light went back inside. But as vampires who were in the gardens and their rooms also crowded outside to see what was happening, nearly a hundred vampires and their subordinate werewolves ended up filling the vicinity of the helipad.

Rude Gardastance, the Gold Yaksha⁴.

Knowing that Rude considered money omnipotent, the vampires looked on with more annoyance than awe.

What was likely one of the biggest helicopters in the world finally landed on the ground, taking up two helipads at once.

The roar of the rotors grew quiet, but even now it was difficult to accept that this was a helicopter, not an airplane.

As the onlookers exchanged dubious glances, the door opened and Gardastance stepped outside.

"Ah, my friends! So good of you to come to receive me! I love you all!"

Spreading his arms wide, Gardastance proudly stepped onto the ground. A pool of red liquid, which had made its way onto the helipad without anyone's notice, wrote out a greeting.

[It has been a long time indeed, Rude. Still fond of big entrances, I see.]

"Ah, Gerhardt! As unpredictable as ever. Well, to be perfectly honest, I was thinking of arriving by military helicopter, shooting our members with paintballs made of tomato juice... but my secretary wasn't looking too happy about it, and, well... Someone was demanding that she be given a ride. I really had no choice but to bring the chopper."

[Ah, so you are bringing company?]

"Yes. We're transporting her outside now."

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yaksha>

Gardastance glanced over at the helicopter. A large hatch on the back opened up, revealing a cargo hold that could probably carry a mid-sized whale.

[...You don't mean to say that you're brought... *her*?]

"I do. A conference at the Mars family's country house is about the only kind of meeting she can attend, after all." Gardastance laughed with a meaningful look. As if on cue, his passenger poked her head out of the hold.

It seemed that she had been cramped inside, in spite of the sheer size of the cargo hold.

That was because she was a massive Tyrannosaurus Rex.

"Hah! I'm sure not many of our officers have ever seen her in person. I've been keeping her hidden on my property for nearly a century now. Well, it took me fifty years or so, but we've finally managed to communicate to a degree. Unfortunately, she's so lacking for blood that she's asleep for about three hundred days a year."

[Hmm... Now, even should your passenger join us, those without the power of telepathy will be unable to communicate with her. By the way, Rude. How do you manage to communicate with her, my friend?]

"Money, Gerhardt. I simply hired a telepath."

As the vampire dinosaur stretched out and roared, the former chairman of the Gardastance Group and the pool of blood continued to talk as though nothing was wrong.

[Ah, but I do suppose this may be a fine opportunity of sorts. Melhilm had always been keen to study her.]

"Of course. Let me tell you about the most curious thing, Gerhardt. She's grown fur on her back and tail! Could it be that *all* dinosaurs had fur, or is she different because she's a vampire?"

[In any event, it must have been difficult to transport her all the way here. Was your company not searched on the way?]

"It certainly was. But I insisted quite firmly that this was part of a film shoot. Although it would have been entertaining to tell the truth and silence the officials with money. Hah!"

Ignoring the fantastical conversation taking place, another pair of vampires were talking amongst themselves.

"I'm gonna take back what I said about this place being like a netherworld."

"...Yeah."

Watching the gigantic newcomer, the brothers Indigo and Yellow chuckled bitterly.

As they looked on, their astonishment had given way to surrender at the scene unfolding before them.

"...Forget demons, this is practically Hollywood."

†

A city in southern Germany.

Several days earlier.

The vampires began to travel to the Mars family's country house one after another for the upcoming event.

At the same time, at a city dozens of kilometers to the east, the humans were also busy preparing for a large event.

Of course, this particular event was more of a ritual than a celebration, and was headed in a completely different direction than the mindless commotion of the vampires.

There was no malice behind the humans' actions—nothing but anxiety and worry.

And so, the people were so easily loosed from law and the order of society and left to rampage.

After all, since they had no malicious intent, they could not feel a shred of guilt.

No matter the consequences of their actions.

The morning after his home was vandalized with graffiti, Horst did his best to prepare breakfast without letting it slip that he had been badly rattled.

Alma looked worse off than she did the previous night. She didn't say a word about the graffiti, but her heartache was clear in her appearance.

'Maybe I should call the police.' Horst thought to himself, but perhaps that would only end up scaring Alma more. After all, the rumors about the vampires were floating around even among the police officers. And as the police considered Alma a witness and not simply a victim, going to them might leave Alma with worse memories.

'But if those bastards from yesterday decide to go even further...

'Maybe I should pester the police until they give her official protection.'

As he ruminated over breakfast, a thought suddenly occurred to him.

'...What if I leave town? It might be hard to quit my job that quickly, but...

'Or maybe I could leave Alma with my folks in Munich. The people there are so much warmer.'

For some reason, Horst got the sense that the people in this city were unnecessarily scared of vampires.

It had always been a bit of an isolated city, but the air of dread running through the streets had only just recently become palpable.

Reporters and journalists from not only Germany, but all over the world, came to town and tried to dig up information. They poked their noses even into business that had nothing to do with the disappearance.

It was probably only natural that the aggravation, coupled with the fear, had hardened the people's hearts. But—

"Horst... What's wrong?"

The postman was jolted out of his musings by Alma's voice. He must have been zoning out for quite a while.

"Huh? Oh. Sorry, I was just thinking about things."

He quickly put on a practiced smile, but Alma stopped what she was doing, crestfallen.

"It really is my fault, isn't it...?"

"Hey, hey. I told you not to say stuff like that, Alma!"

Horst raised his voice slightly. He leaned forward and ruffled Alma's hair, so she could not continue.

"I have the day off today, so let's go somewhere and enjoy ourselves. What do you say?"

"But..."

"C'mon. Don't worry. Sometimes, you just need a change of pace."

Horst decided to take Alma out, disregarding her hesitation. But he was partly motivated by the desire to stay far away from his home, where some of the graffiti from the previous day still remained.

He hadn't yet decided on where they would go, but he wanted to avoid the view of the mountains.

So he chose the nearby shopping mall.

He hoped that it would bring Alma some cheer after what she had gone through.

With that, Horst began preparing to leave.

The people on the streets might give them cold looks.

The vandals who put graffiti on his house might do even worse if he ran into them.

Such worries ran through his mind, but Horst told himself that no one would try anything in the middle of a shopping mall in broad daylight. Not many people knew Alma by appearance, and the bandage on her neck wasn't so unusual a feature that she couldn't hide it under a hood.

With that, Horst made up his mind.

His attempt ended in a half-success.

As he suspected, nothing happened to them in the city.

He was almost surprised at how much he and Alma enjoyed his day off. Perhaps it was just his imagination, but some of the shadows had been chased from Alma's eyes.

"Did you have fun today?" Horst asked absently as he and Alma headed home from the biggest shopping mall in the city.

The girl slowly looked up and said in a quiet voice,

"...That was my first time going to a shopping mall."

"Yeah..."

A girl living in a village in the mountains could not possibly have gone to a mall before. The furthest the village children ever went was probably the elementary school at the foot of the mountains.

In schools in Germany, most classes ended before noon. The village children went home before it got dark, so they had little interaction with the children in town. As a matter of fact, not a single child had come to see Alma in the hospital after the incident.

Of course, even if she did have friends at school, the children's parents probably prevented them from coming to visit.

It felt as though, compared to the countryside or the bigger cities in Germany, this city was downcast and melancholy.

'I miss Oktoberfest.'

Horst had gone to Oktoberfest several times in the past. Recalling the warm smiles of the people he met there, he wished that this city could smile like they did.

"...Thank you."

"Hm?"

He turned to look at Alma.

She was looking up at him with a smile.

Though it was tinged with sadness, she had never once smiled until now.

Glad to have brought her outside, Horst answered with a smile of his own and ruffled her hair.

And so, his plan was half-complete.

The reason it was not fully successful was because Alma's smile would disappear that evening.

When they returned, his house was on fire.

Chapter 4: Past of the Vampires

On a highway in Germany.

It was just as Gardastance's helicopter was landing on the Mars estate.

A vampire who should have already been at the country house was at the wheel of a white car.

She had pale white skin and shimmering white hair. Other than the warm glint in her silver eyes, she was the very image of a snow queen.

Her name was Dorothy Nifas.

She was the officer of the color white, as well as Gerhardt's fiancée.

If things had gone according to schedule, she would have arrived at the conference early for a pleasant chat with Gerhardt in front of a toasty-warm fireplace.

But at the moment, she was driving down the highway at perfectly legal speeds in spite of her tardiness.

Because Dorothy was capable of transforming into a flock of white bats at will, she had the option of getting to the conference faster in her alternate form. But this time, she had no such intentions.

That was because of her passenger. The girl sitting next to her.

In stark contrast to Dorothy, the girl was wearing a black dress. She was Ferret, who had run off from Growerth half a day earlier.

"I'm sorry, Ferret. It might have been more comfortable if I'd rented us a plane."

"Not at all... It is my own fault for not telling anyone that I was leaving." Ferret said, slightly nervous.

Confusion was still clear in her eyes, and on occasion she glanced over at Dorothy with a look of wonder and discomfort.

'So this woman... is Father's fiancée...'

Ferret had recklessly charged off the island and come to the mainland, but at that point she had no idea how she should go about looking for Michael. That was when a white bat flew over to her and spoke.

The bat soon transformed into a beautiful woman, who smiled and offered Ferret a handshake.

"You must be Ferret. I'm Dorothy—Dorothy Nifas. It's very good to meet you. The maids at Waldstein Castle contacted me, so I came to get you."

"Oh..."

"Oh, yes! It might be a little awkward to tell you this so suddenly, but we're going to be family one day. I hope we can get along."

"F-family?!"

The first thing that jumped to her mind was the image of a sister-in-law.

"Wh-what do you mean by that?! Honored Brother is already involved with Hilda—" She blurted out.

Dorothy went on to properly explain that she was Gerhardt's fiancée. Ferret was so embarrassed that she wanted to crawl into a hole, but she was mostly rattled by the revelation.

'To think that Father was engaged... I had heard the rumors, but I always thought they were nothing more than jokes...'

Although Ferret outwardly claimed that Relic was all she needed, in her heart she saw Gerhardt as her father proper. Though she remained calm on the surface, the news that her father was engaged called up some indescribable emotion in her heart.

'Just how in the world...? ...With Father?!'

As much as Ferret cared for her father, it was impossible to deny that he was made of blood. Just what kind of a woman could possibly agree to marry such a being?

Or had they been engaged since before his metamorphosis?

'What if she is after the Waldstein family's money or power...?' Ferret found herself wondering for a moment, but she quickly chastised herself for thinking so badly of a woman she had only just met.

But she honestly could not tell how they came to be engaged. Although looks mattered relatively little between vampires, there was still a line that could not be crossed.

Noticing Ferret's confusion, Dorothy giggled.

"What is it? It looks like you have something you want to say."

"...! ...Umm... I would like to make this clear. Although Father is a part of it now... I do not think well of your Organization."

"Of course. The incident from half a year ago, and what happened with your birth parents. It's understandable."

"..."

Ferret was somewhat surprised that Dorothy so easily acknowledged the Organization's wrongdoings.

She had heard the story before.

That her and Relic's parents were originally from the Organization; that they had escaped to prevent their children from being used as tools.

"Are they still after Honored Brother and his powers, I wonder."

The reason the Organization refused to leave Growerth alone was because of the power within Relic von Waldstein.

The vampires of the Organization had spent years upon years undertaking research to create an essence of vampiric power. Relic was one of the products of their research.

His powers were unmatched among vampirekind. He could wield an entire island like it was a part of the clothes on his back, synchronizing with it and transforming into hundreds of millions—or even billions of—

"I think it's important for you to know that some members are after your brother. Especially Caldimir and Melhilm. Now, Melhilm won't try anything if Gerhardt's around, but Caldimir hates Gerhardt."

"...! Is Father really in such danger?"

"Don't worry. Caldimir may hate Gerhardt, but he doesn't have the gall to try to hurt him. In that sense, I think that mayor of yours might actually be more of a threat."

"Watt Stalf..." Ferret mumbled, hanging her head.

Watt Stalf was the mayor of the city of Neuberg on the island of Growerth. He was a dhampyr, a being who was of both vampire and human descent.

Having made a habit of pestering Gerhardt, Watt was more clearly an enemy of the viscount than the Organization.

"You are right. I wonder why Father lets him walk free even now..."

"Because your father is a kind man."

"He is merely too lenient."

"Maybe you're right. But that's also why he accepted your parents and let them onto the island, even though it meant turning his back on his old friend."

Ferret was silenced.

She knew very little about her birth parents. Gerhardt had often told her that they were people she could be proud of, but to her, the only image conjured up by the word 'parent' was that of a pool of blood.

That was why she had so valued her connection to her brother. But in more recent months, her relationship with Relic was no longer the only one that mattered to her.

"Your father is a wonderful man." Dorothy said with a warm smile.

"Pardon?"

"Anyone could tell just by looking at you."

"What do you mean...?"

Ferret was not expecting that answer. She could not hide her bewilderment.

"Oh? You're trying to sneak into the Organization's conference for the boy you love. Anyone could see just how wonderful your father is, raising such an outgoing and considerate daughter."

"Wh-what are you saying?! I-I only..."

"'You only'...?"

"I... I only wish to stop Michael before he does anything foolish... Because he is a friend of Honored Brother... I-in any case! I intend only to bring that foolish human back to the island before he makes a mockery of us all! I have no ulterior motives!" Ferret babbled. The snow-white vampire smiled gently.

"You remind me a lot of Gerhardt when he was younger."

"...! ...? Father... when he was younger?"

"That's right. A long time ago, when he was still in human form. He would always try to act so confident. Now that I think about it, you may not be related, but you and Relic do resemble him somehow."

"..."

The sudden mention of her father's human form aroused Ferret's curiosity. But something else came to her first.

"You must have known Father for a very long time."

"Yes. Since before the Organization was founded, in fact. Although we weren't engaged until later."

"...I would have expected a fiancée to follow her future husband out of the Organization." Ferret said sarcastically. She immediately regretted what she did, and despised herself for thinking in such a direction.

As she wondered if she should apologize, Dorothy responded as though she was unaffected.

"You're right. I stayed behind... and Gerhardt returned to Growerth."

Nostalgically recalling the past, Dorothy narrowed her eyes.

"That was about when Gerhardt and I agreed to marry."

"Pardon...?"

'They became engaged just as they were about to part?'

Ferret looked at Dorothy, waiting for an answer.

A smile remained on Dorothy's face, although the sentiment behind it shifted. Her lips curved up slightly, as though she was embarrassed.

"Well... where should I begin?"

After a moment of thought, Dorothy asked Ferret a question.

"Do you like humans?"

"...?"

The question seemed to come out of nowhere. Ferret fell into thought.

Dorothy's questions never seemed to follow a set flow of thought, perhaps speaking for the fact that she was difficult to read. But her question just now was not one that could be easily laughed away.

Ferret hesitated, her fingers tightening over the hem of her skirt.

"...There is an insurmountable wall between humans and vampires. Emotions such as 'liking' or 'disliking' are on too low a scale to compare. Or do you wonder if I like humans in the same way I like cats or dogs?"

Ferret was talking in the same pompous way she spoke to Relic and Michael, but there wasn't as much energy behind her words this time.

Dorothy replied in a lighthearted tone.

"That's fine too. Are you a dog person? Or a cat person? Or a human person?"

"P-please! This is no time for jokes!" Ferret protested. Dorothy snickered and turned the steering wheel.

And with that same smile, she paused.

"You know, I despise humans."

"Wha..."

Ferret found herself gasping.

"Don't get me wrong. It's not as though I want all of humanity dead. There are humans I respect and like, but there are more enemies among them than friends. In that sense, I despise the human race."

"..."

"That's why I manipulated Gerhardt into creating the Organization."

"...You 'manipulated' him?" Ferret frowned.

"I think it'll be best that I tell you this in person, rather than have you hear it second-hand from someone else... Let's talk about how the Organization was first founded."

Ferret was silenced. All Gerhardt had told her about the Organization was that it was a sort of social club. She was curious to know what the Organization was to other vampires.

Dorothy took Ferret's silence as a 'yes' and quietly began to explain, her voice tinged with nostalgia, sadness, love, and countless other emotions.

†

Hundreds of years ago, somewhere in Northern Europe.

She was as beautiful as snow.

But her heart was crushed, and snow eventually turned to ice.

Dorothy Nifas was born a vampire.

Her parents were also vampires, and judging from their skin and hair colors, they were probably close relatives.

Or perhaps one was originally human before being turned by their spouse. But that mattered little to Dorothy.

She had the so-called 'demonic' power to freeze the air around her.

She was indeed a near-demonic creature, but she was not very aware of that fact at the time.

She had been traveling through many countries in Northern Europe with her parents.

Her physical beauty and the color of her hair were much too conspicuous to humans eyes.

On occasion, when they passed by a human settlement, her parents would tell her,

"You must never allow yourself to be seen by humans."

Until she matured fully, they always veered very far from settlements. And in that era, that was enough for them to steer clear of human contact.

But tragedy struck one day, when Dorothy helped a young man—a human—whom she found collapsed in the snowy mountains.

The young man was nearly frozen, very close to death. She took him to a cabin nearby and started a fire in the fireplace, knowing that her touch would only kill the man faster.

She must not be seen by humans.

Although the lesson was clear in her mind, Dorothy could not fight her curiosity. Humans looked very much like vampires. They spoke the same language. And they were much more numerous. She could not help herself.

When the man finally recovered, he thanked her. He must have realized that Dorothy was not quite human.

She asked the young man to keep secret the fact that he met her, and the young man agreed to do so.

Unlike *yuki-onna* of Japanese legend, she did not make him swear to secrecy on pain of death. The thought did not even occur to her.

She did not tell her parents about the encounter, only allowing her heart to race in excitement at the thought that she had finally met one of those curious beings.

But there were a few things she should have realized.

Just as she broke her promise to her parents, humans were capable of breaking promises as well.

And that humans loathed beings they thought to be 'Others'.

†

Present day.

"The day after the man went down the mountain, he came back up." Dorothy said quietly, her hands on the steering wheel. "Along with many people from the village."

"..."

"The last I saw, my parents' throats were slit as they slept in their coffins and set on fire."

Although there was little gravitas in Dorothy's tone, Ferret could not bring herself to say a word.

Gerhardt had told her that her own parents had been murdered by Hunters.

She found herself picturing the parents she never knew, burning to death. In her mind, they naturally had the same faces as herself and Relic. A chill ran down Ferret's spine.

"It's nothing surprising. The young man I helped knew about us from the very start. He was from a scouting team that searched abandoned huts on the mountain where strange monsters were said to live. ...It was my own fault. If only I'd told my parents about what I did. If only I hadn't broken my promise. They might still be alive. I might have met Gerhardt differently."

"...Do you... resent that young man and the villagers?"

"No. Not anymore. I told you, it was really my own fault."

A faint smile crept up on Dorothy's face. But there was a mysterious chill in her lips.

"After all... They're all dead and gone now."

"..."

That was only natural, considering the lifespan of humans.

But did the young man and the villagers really die natural deaths?

The cold note in Dorothy's voice made Ferret wonder.

But instead of asking for confirmation on every question she could think of, Ferret decided to wait in silence for Dorothy to continue.

"For a long time, I couldn't trust anyone. I went out into the sea as though escaping from the humans, using my white coffin as a boat... If I were weak against flowing water, I would have died for sure. But in that state, I guess I would have been all right with turning to ash."

Dorothy chuckled masochistically. The chill in her voice was now nowhere to be found.

"To me, there was nothing more to life than traveling with my family. And having lost that... I had no need for a world full of those creatures who murdered my parents."

The car shook briefly, perhaps having run over a rock.

Ferret still could not say anything. She continued to listen as an audience of one.

"I thought to myself... If I fled to the sea and somehow made it back alive... I would destroy humanity."

In the flood of emotions Dorothy spilled, Ferret recalled a certain woman.

An Eater named Shizune Kijima.

In the past, Shizune had worked with Watt Stalf for the purpose of destroying every vampire in the world—and perhaps she still wished to do so.

Gerhardt had explained that Shizune threw herself into revenge after her family was massacred by a vampire.

Dorothy and Shizune. Two women from completely different backgrounds who had walked the very same path.

They were not the only ones.

Ferret herself had also seethed in rage, desiring revenge, when she was attacked by the armored Eater.

As her thoughts reached that point, she was quickly seized by a terrible fear.

"Umm... I do not wish to interrupt, but..."

"Oh? What is it?" Dorothy asked pleasantly. Ferret decided to get straight to the point.

"That armored man who attacked Michael. What is he doing now? If he happens to run into Michael at the conference..." Ferret trailed off, her fears surfacing over her mask of confidence.

Dorothy looked at her affectionately and answered.

"They might run into one another there, but I don't think he'll be attacking Michael."

"That is impossible! That man was clearly insane! I cannot see him changing his mind so easily!"

Recalling the bone-chilling emotion she felt when the armored man attacked her and Michael, Ferret panicked.

But Dorothy remained calm.

"You're right. ...Rudi's will wouldn't bend so easily. But that's why... he was broken."

"What...?"

"The way he is now... He wouldn't be able to fight, even if he wanted to."

As though reminded of something, Dorothy glanced at her watch.

"Now that I think about it... The conference should be starting soon."

†

At the same time, inside the dining hall of the Mars family's country house.

The vast room was made not for the residents of the mansion, but for its guests.

Vampires of all shapes and sizes were gathered in the dining hall, which was large enough to house five hundred people.

Of the officers, some came alone; others were accompanied by nearly a dozen subordinates. Even their appearances were scattered across the spectrum, from a girl in cosplay gear to a pool of blood to a chihuahua.

They were currently in the middle of a conference, discussing the mass disappearance that took place in a mountain village east of the Mars family's country house.

In front of each officer was a laptop provided by the Mars family, and the meeting progressed based on the information that came up on the shared screens.

One Mars family servant was behind each officer for the convenience of those who could not use computers. They provided all sorts of assistance, from working the interface to interpreting between languages.

The conference was almost a show of excessive consideration.

In the midst of all that, one particular pool of blood explained very plainly the incident in question.

[Though we have no proof of vampires' involvement in this incident, it is true that there are such rumors floating around the city.]

He was making use of his peculiar talent of writing in the air and simultaneously typing on the keyboard to show his words on the shared screen.

Gardastance, sitting behind the nameplate labeled 'Gold', spoke up.

"Is that a particularly pressing problem? It's possible that a vampire unaffiliated with the Organization is behind the incident. We have a great deal of precedent for such cases."

[Of course, my friend. But this incident has become too large of a news item in the world of humans.]

"What does that matter? In America, most believe it was the work of terrorists. ...Or perhaps you had something else to bring up at this conference?" Gardastance asked plainly. Gerhardt sloshed in place.

[In fact, yes. We have received a joint letter from three of the Clans. They seem to suspect that the Organization was behind this incident.]

'Clans'.

The very mention of the word visibly stirred the dining hall.

Caldimir, now recovered from his injuries, continued where Gerhardt left off.

"Those accursed *fossils* can't be much keener to get rid of us. They even brought up the mass murderer from over ten years ago."

[Of course, we responded with a definitive 'no' to those accusations. Doubs Hewley should have gone to confirm the facts for himself... Hm? Now that I think on it, he has yet to arrive...]

†

There was a small group listening in to the conversation from outside the dining room.

"I can't see him yet, but I'm glad the viscount's doing all right."

Michael, Doubs, and Fannie.

They were standing in the hallway with their backs to the door, clearly eavesdropping. Doubs waved at the servants in the corridor. Fannie looked at him, uncertain.

"Mr. Doubs, why aren't you going inside?"

"It won't do to be anything but fashionably tardy, don't you agree?"

Fannie looked astonished, but Michael nodded in understanding.

They were also watching the shared screen through a laptop given to them by a servant.

One word in particular caught Michael's interest.

"Say... what're 'Clans' supposed to be?"

"Ah, yes. I suppose you could say that they are groups of vampires discretely different from the Organization. They are composed of pure-blood vampires of the same bloodline, not mixed with any other lineage... A family of vampires, if you will. And not just one generation. If a family of vampires grows over many multiples of years to have over thirty members, it comes to be known as a Clan."

"So it's one of those huge families!"

"I suppose you're right. After all, if two immortals had a child once every ten years, they would have a hundred children by the end of one millennium. Some Clans do, in fact, have over two hundred members. The only reason they don't reproduce like rats is because that would lead to self-collapse. Clans keep reproduction seriously and severely in check." Doubs explained, pulling up an internet browser on the screen separately from the shared one.

He browsed to a page about vampires on an internet encyclopedia, which listed all sorts of characteristics and examples.

"Vampires from Clans are very much like the vampires you humans usually imagine. They suck humans' blood, lord over werewolf and witch servants, and think of vampires as superior to humans. They transform themselves into fog and flocks of bats, live deep in the forests, and put up macabre magical shields that repel humans. These typical vampires you see in cartoons and films are the kind you would find in a Clan. Of course, no Clan thus far has been able to use *all* abilities equally, and no vampire is powerful enough to dream of conquering the world like you see in movies... At least, not until rather recently."

"Huh... So you mean..."

One vampire in particular came to Michael's mind.

As though having waited for that conclusion, Doubs put on a gleeful smile.

"You are correct! Your friend Relic von Waldstein. Deftly deduced. Your reward is money!"

"W-wait! I can't take that!" Michael stammered. Doubs chuckled, saying he was only joking, and continued to explain.

"You see, Relic was born with the power of all such vampires—with power enough to surpass them. He was born to become the ultimate vampire. To be blunt, Clans—although there are differences between families and individuals—generally do not welcome vampires outside of

their own lineage. From their perspective, we are vampires who cross the line of normalcy. In other words, they see us as lowly and disgusting monsters."

Fannie, who had been silent all this time, spoke up.

"They're... really awful. They tried to kill me without a second thought."

"What?"

"They said I wasn't a true vampire... That I was just a fake that didn't evolve from a human."

In the little boy's eyes was a look of intense rage and a sliver of fear.

What had happened to him in the past? His eyes alone were enough to show how much he had suffered.

Although Michael wanted to hear more about the Clans, the shared screen suddenly shifted to the next topic. He decided to follow the conference for the time being.

†

[The people of the city point to the wounds on the girl's neck as so-called proof, but we unfortunately have no way of knowing if they were caused by a vampire. Although it is worth noting that the young lady has been seen walking in broad daylight.]

Gardastance rubbed his chin.

"If it's confirmation we need, I'll gladly buy out the hospital, or the relevant law enforcement officials."

Caldimir's temples twitched visibly.

"Every camera and reporter from the *entire world* is swarming around the city, turning over every rock they can find. If you engage in underhanded deals like that, the Gardastance Group *will* be suspected."

"Of course. I suppose that means I should buy out the media, as well."

"Are you even *listening* to me?!" Caldimir squawked.

At that point, a tan-skinned man who had been quiet during the meeting raised his hand. He looked like a Native American, but he was wearing a Hawaiian shirt with sandals and sunglasses. His physique was a full-figured mix of muscle and fat, making him look very much like a born thug or the president of a neighborhood venture business.

The man laughed leisurely and addressed Gardastance.

"Hah hah hah... Unfortunately for you, Mr. Gardastance, one of my TV crews is on the scene as well. Please don't make the mistake of assuming my company can be bought out so easily. Hah hah hah."

The man with the unusual laugh was, in reality, neither a thug nor a president. But in terms of influence, he was a match(or perhaps more than a match) for Gardastance.

He was Zao Dugnald, a producer at a famous American TV station. He also appeared in many television programs in person as a host or a commentator.

Gardastance took a moment to think.

"Now that you mention it... I suppose it might be rather challenging to bribe your people."

"Hah hah. There, there, my man. You're already one of our sponsors—if you've got money to burn on bribes, why don'tcha help us out with our production budget?"

"I'll consider it."

"Wait! Hold it, the both of you!"

Calimir cut in.

"The TV station is under your influence, Zao? Then it's simply a matter of having them report false information."

"Hah hah hah. I'd prefer to give my little 'family' the freedom of press."

"This is no *time* for your little policies! Damn it all! I could say this to the rest of you, but why don't you ever attend conferences with at least a hint of gravity?!" Calimir complained. Aiji sighed.

"Calm down, Calimir. Count your blessings that Mirald the Mirror, Hawking the Void, and Doubs the Iridescent haven't shown up yet."

†

Listening in from the corridor, Doubs put on a face of utter shock.

"How horribly hurtful of Mr. Ishibashi! Treating me like a nuisance?! And on the same level as Mirald and Hawking, of all people!"

"That's because you get in the way of every conference."

"How could you say such a thing, Fannie?! The only reason I conspire with Mirald and Hawking to get in Calimir's way is because of his dreadfully dull babbling! Because bothering him is really the best source of entertainment for me, and me alone!"

Ignoring Doubs, who ended up admitting his guilt, Fannie quietly listened in on the conference.

Michael, meanwhile, read through the documents presented on the screen, and spoke in an unusually grave tone.

"But still... I wonder what really happened in that village."

At that moment,

Fwump.

There was the sound of something falling. Michael found himself looking up.

Standing there was a young man.

He was not very tall, probably about the same height as Michael. He was wearing a mainly black and white gothic-style outfit, and there was a hint of childlikeness in his face.

However, though the young man should have been in his prime, his complexion was sickly and ashen.

"You all right?"

The young man must have dropped the cloth pouch he was holding. Michael picked it up with his left hand and held it out to the newcomer.

But the young man stared, frozen still.

"How... what are you... what are you doing here...?"

"Huh?"

Michael glimpsed a flash of distress pass by the young man's eyes. It was a look of pure shock, one that surfaced when it was impossible to think of an emotion to react with.

"Uh... have we... met before...?"

Michael tilted his head for a moment, confused. But he trailed off as a strange sensation began to emerge in the back of his head.

"Hey... that voice. I've—"

Michael looked down and thought.

The young man's face was unfamiliar to him—that much was certain.

But he had heard that fear-tinged voice before.

'Wait...'

Without warning, a certain scene began to play in his mind.

His own bloodied body, and Ferret's face, wracked with despair.

As his paralyzed right hand began to ache, Michael's thoughts were swept up in a frenzy of memories.

'It can't be...'



He looked up, jolted out of his reverie. He opened his mouth to speak to the frozen young man.

"...You're... don't tell me..."

"Ah... Aaaaahhh...!"

The moment Michael realized who he was, the young man turned where he stood and fled down the corridor.

"Hey, wait!" Michael called with surprising energy, but the young man ignored him and ran, stumbling on occasion.

Michael went after him, leaving Doubs and Fannie alone in front of the dining hall.

"...What was that all about? And who was that?" Fannie wondered. Doubs responded with a glint in his eye.

"That would be Rudi Wenders. One of the Organization's Eaters. I'm sure even you must have heard of the Hunters Hraesvelgr and Nidhogg, the duo who reported directly to Caldimir?"

"Yeah. I don't know the details, but the woman was subjugated by a vampire and betrayed us, right? And now the man is useless, too."

"Correct! Half a year ago, he half-murdered a human without orders, and was himself near death when Garde the Black managed to revive him. Of course, this particular hound is no longer useful as a warrior, at least compared to before."

"So what's that got to do with Michael?" Fannie asked innocently, his curiosity piqued.

Doubs' eyes glinted as though he was struck by a sudden stroke of luck. He pressed his hat down over his head.

"You see, Michael was the human being whom Rudi nearly murdered."

"What?!"

"To think that they would encounter one another, just like that! My heart was pounding in anticipation for that magical moment! Scenes like this are always better candid than staged." Doubs said with a look of honest pleasure, in spite of the loathsome content of his words. "Things are finally getting more interesting. Aren't you excited, Fannie? Dear me, I'm immensely interested in this conference, but I can't bear to not follow those two! What to do?"

"...You're sick *and* disgusting, Mr. Doubs." Fannie sighed, turning to the laptop screen.

"I"

Suddenly, he stiffened and leaned in close to the screen, eyes wide.

On the shared screen was the image of a little girl.

"What might be the matter, Fannie? Widening your eyes, making your irises look even more like contact lenses than usual."

"Who... is this girl?"

"Ah. She would be the survivor from the mass disappearance case. She's only twelve years old, but she does look rather resolute for her age... Has she stolen your heart?"

In terms of appearance, she looked to be about the same age as Fannie. The photograph must have been taken at school before the incident; there was an innocent smile on the girl's pretty face.

Ignoring Doubs' teasing, Fannie mumbled blankly.

"She's... the survivor..."

"Yes. Thanks to the two marks on her neck, which look very much like marks from a vampire's bite, she's under suspicion of being connected to—Fannie? Are you listening to me? Fannie?"

"...She looks delicious..."

The vampire in the shape of a little boy stared at the image, mesmerized. Saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth.

"Oh no, what to do... My heart's pounding. I can feel it... I want to suck all her blood and make all her flesh and blood mine... But before that, I just want to hold that slender body tight and sink my fangs into her neck..."

As the boy descended further and further into madness, Doubs chuckled and stretched.

"Goodness me. Your unfortunate... tastes... are showing again, Fannie. Now, I wonder which of us is the truly disgusting one?"

Ignoring Fannie's fixation on the laptop screen, Doubs muttered to himself.

"...But then again, I suppose nothing you think of doing to that girl will matter if she's not in one piece when you meet her... After all, sometimes, humans are capable of things that even disgusting monsters like you could never imagine."

†

A day earlier.

After giving his testimony at the police station, Horst picked up Alma and headed for the doors.

It had been two days since his house went up in flames. According to the police, it was probably an act of arson. But they had no idea who could be behind the crime.

"It's the assholes who drew that graffiti on my wall. It's got to be them!" Horst had said. The detective nodded, but told him that it would be difficult to find a concrete connection between the vandalism incident and the arson case.

When Horst asked why, the detective answered thus:

"Because we have too many leads."

"What...?"

"Do you have any idea just how many people around here think Alma was bitten by a vampire and turned into one of their slaves? Or how many people think she *is* a vampire? I'm not talking about some religion or an organization. I'm talking about *everyone, anywhere and everywhere.*"

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Horst stood, ready to say something, but the detective cut in sharply.

"We're not stupid enough to buy into those ridiculous rumors and let them get away with it, damn it! But there's just too many of them. If we're just going by that one motive... we'd have over a thousand suspects on our hands if we're lucky. I *want* to tell you that we'll put all our efforts into the investigation, but I can't even do that. All our men are busy with the disappearance case."

The detective could not hide his irritation.

After all, the people the police were supposed to protect were the ones being swept up by rumors, stirring up malice in the community.

The worst part about it all was the fact that the individuals who made up the community had no ill will.

For example, even when Alma and Horst were walking around the neighborhood, no one glared at them or called Alma a vampire to her face.

After all, anyone who did such a thing would be labeled as 'an idiot who actually believes in vampires'.

The city was swarmed by the media; no matter how much the residents of the city suspected Alma, the girl was known to the rest of the world as an innocent victim.

Because the people were scared, those who wished to hurt the girl were afraid of having their own actions labeled as 'evil'.

After all, they had no ill will—or at least, that was what they believed.

That was what vexed Horst the most.

If it was like a case of bullying in school or at a workplace, where the bullies showed themselves to the victim, he could probably work up the determination to fight back and refuse to be defeated.

When he first heard the rumors going around town, Horst was prepared.

'They might ignore me if I try to talk to them.

'They might throw rocks at us.

'They might swear at Alma and call her a vampire.

'They might refuse to sell to us and kick us out of their stores.

'They might even attack us outright.'

Horst would probably have preferred that his assumptions came true.

After all, then he could face the people head-on and talk back properly.

But the people's malice left behind only devastating conclusions in its wake, never allowing itself to be seen.

It was like finding a dead cat in your desk, only to find that the rest of the class treated you just as kindly as they did before. An indescribable sense of unease.

It was different from the sadness and anger of being the only one left out of a gathering of friends. There was only a heavy chill in the air, the sharp sense of his innards turning inside-out.

There was a venomous air over the city, much like being around a person who posted all sorts of malicious comments on the internet yet behaved warmly in real life.

His foes did not give him a chance to retort. They did not give him the chance to glimpse their form.

And though Horst was only receiving the abuse second-hand, Alma was being subjected to it directly.

'I... I have to do something...'

He had not yet told his parents about the fire. Not only was he reluctant to worry them, he was also afraid that his parents would suffer as a result of his connection to Alma.

Horst wondered if an ordinary postman like him could protect her. But then again, he had nowhere to turn at this point.

After all, he did not know just what places in this city were safe.

He wondered if he should turn Alma in to the police for protection, but since she had closed her heart to them, he could not see that as a valid decision.

'I'd better seriously consider leaving town...' Horst thought to himself, stepping out of the police station. Suddenly, he felt someone's gaze on him.

He looked around without thinking, but the streets around him were no different from any other day.

Was he being paranoid now? As he questioned himself, he began to begrudge the unfairness of the situation.

It was unjust. That this city, no different from usual—the city he called home—was his and Alma's enemy.

Alma must have felt a similar sense of worry. He could see it in her eyes.

"...There's nothing to worry about, Alma." He said, giving her a gentle pat on the head. Horst wanted to try and encourage her somehow.

"But... it's all my fault that your house—"

"I told you not to worry about it! Those rumors are going to stop soon. Just you wait and see. *They're* the crazy ones for believing in vampires— ...wait, I... uh..."

He immediately regretted what he said.

Bringing up the rumors would only scare Alma more. He hurriedly tried to make up for his reckless words.

"It's okay, Alma. I know that you're human. So don't pay attention to anything those people say, all right?"

Not knowing if he had properly made up for what he said, Horst glanced at Alma.

"..."

He could not look away.

She was looking up at him without a word.

In her eyes was an indescribable sense of despair. Though she had come to see Horst as family in the few short days they shared together, now she was looking up at him with nothing but despair in her eyes.

It was not disappointment or resentment, but a look thick with resignation.

Rather than surprise, it was an expression that accepted a predestined disaster.

"A-Alma...?"

Horst felt as though an icicle had been driven into his spine.

Perhaps he had done something that could not be taken back.

He did not know what that 'something' was.

But he knew for certain that he had hurt Alma.

"Wh-what did I..."

"No... I'm sorry. It's nothing."

Alma quietly shook her head and began to walk away.

"...Oh... right..."

Horst quietly followed after her.

But Alma, walking just a couple of steps ahead, looked like a girl from a distant world indeed.

However, Horst and Alma were still connected.

After all, they were soon to be swept together in a veritable flood of malice.

†

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The laboratory.

It was about twenty hours after the girl without a home fell into despair.

A vampire who had once slaughtered countless people was sitting on his chair with a grave expression.

<You look so tired, Doctor! Is there something the matter?>

Addressing the boy—Theodosius M. Waldstein—was a large white coffin.

Unlike normal coffins, this one was standing upright, and had caterpillar tracks installed underneath that allowed it to move.

There were also robotic arms sticking out of the coffin, and it was even wearing a very large lab coat.

It was an appearance that was either a joke or a nightmare, but the tone of the coffin's voice—squeaky and endearing like a kitten straight out of an anime—and its cutesy gestures made it seem like a young woman.

The coffin known as 'Professor' once possessed a different body.

Doctor once had a companion; a vampire named Elsa Wenders.

But the young woman named Elsa—her body and memories—was long gone, leaving behind the character of 'Professor' and the body of a coffin. She continued her research alongside Doctor in her new form.

"I was just thinking about what happened in that village in the south." Doctor sighed.

Today, he was not speaking like an old man.

After the incident six months ago, Doctor had stopped talking that way to Professor. He still put up a front for those not in the know, but to Professor he showed his true self.

However, he had not told her every detail of his past yet. Their relationship had neither changed nor remained the same. Perhaps it spoke for how close they were that they were not very awkward around one another in spite of all that had happened.

<Now that I think about it, you said someone came to visit the other day while I was asleep. Was he trying to investigate something?>

"Well, Michael took the conversation off the rails. But the man had a listen to what I had to say, and left. I think... he must have been looking into every possible lead. He told me that my experiences were a big help. But something bothers me. Doubs Hewley is not sane. He's not like either humans or vampires. He'd destroy the border between the two species without a care, just for the sake of his own amusement."

<Doctor... Why did you tell someone like that about your past?>

'Without even telling me?' Professor wanted to add, but she held back.

After all, she had sworn to accept Doctor, no matter what he had done in the past.

Therefore, she had no reason to pry.

But Theo laughed self-deprecatingly and said something unusual.

"Michael came to see me."

<Yes! You said he was in high spirits. I'm so glad he's all recovered now~!> Professor celebrated, happy for the boy even though she had not met him many times. Doctor reacted, slowly closing his eyes.

"I thought... that Michael would be angry at me. I thought that that was why he came."

<What?!>

"All this time after he recovered, I waited. I was ready for him to lash out at me—to tell me that it was my fault that he and Ferret were hurt. No... that was what I wanted."

<Doctor...>

Theo leaned back, blankly looking up at the ceiling.

"If only I hadn't come to this island. If only I hadn't done what I did, Rudi and Theresia would never have come to Growerth. And Michael and Ferret would have been able to enjoy the festival together. But Michael... he didn't get angry at me. In fact... it was as though he forgot the fact that he was injured at all."

<Th-that must have been because he had no idea you were involved...>

"...I told Relic everything, so Michael should have heard. But in the end, he said that I shouldn't worry, but... heh... us aside, it was like he didn't even blame the Organization."

His chair creaked loudly. Theo lightly shut his eyes, as though prepared to fall asleep.

"Thanks to that, I remembered everything that happened in the past. And... I found my resolve. To tell you the whole story."

He slowly began his confession.

"This is something I want you to hear, but at the same time... you might not want to hear it. So stop me if you don't want to listen anymore."

<Doctor...>

"That's right... I was still about seven years old back then. I'll start with that. The day I met a vampire for the first time."

Theodosius fell into a dreamlike state as he recounted his memories. As though singing a lullaby, the sadness and pain of his past tinting his future.

"I wanted to become a vampire."

†

The past.

The older girl he met on Growerth called herself a vampire.

Even the seven-year-old boy knew what a vampire was.

They were demonic monsters who could transform into wolves or flocks of bats, fly through the air with ease, and drink people's blood to turn them into zombies or ghouls.

That was what movies, picture books, and cartoons always told him. So even in his young mind they were automatically branded as 'fearful creatures'.

But the vampire Theo met betrayed his expectations completely.

Just before the lost Theo was returned safely to his parents, the girl produced a single bat from her fingertips.

"...Aren't you afraid?"

Theo shook his head firmly.

The sight of the bat rising up from the girl's hand, accompanied by a light fog, was magical. It engraved deep into the boy's instincts the impression that this was not an illusion or a sleight of hand.

And so, Theo found himself a slave to the vampire.

When he was reunited with his parents, he turned around. But the girl was already nowhere to be seen, leaving nothing but an evening breeze where she stood.

But Theo was unable to erase her from his thoughts. He begged his parents to visit the island even more often.

He thought of coming back to the island as many times as it took to see her again. And once he became an adult, he would buy himself a house on Growerth. But their reunion came sooner than he had expected.

Half a year later, he spotted the girl in the castle garden. He ran outside, only telling his parents that he was going out to play.

"Oh? And you are...?"

The girl seemed to have forgotten him, but when he explained that she helped him when he was separated from his family, she remembered.

"I see. So you remembered me."

As the girl smiled, unable to hide her joy, Theo once again fell under the impression that his very heart was in her gentle hands.

"I'm a vampire. Aren't you afraid of me?"

It was the same question she had asked half a year ago.

The boy shook his head firmly. The girl smiled just as she had on the day they met.

"I see. Thank you."

Her gentle smile became a drug that captivated his thoughts.

And without knowing, the boy and the girl began to destroy each other's lives.

Slowly but surely, little by little, like poison welling up in their bodies—

From that day forth, Theo and the girl encountered one another many times.

On some occasions, they made plans to meet. But other times, they met by chance—on both Growerth and the mainland.

She told him that the island was like a paradise for vampires.

Though she said that countless vampires lived on the island, Theo had never seen one other than the girl. The girl was never with other vampires, either.

When Theo wondered about this, the girl gave him a rather strange answer.

"Well... that's because I'm uncomfortable around vampires."

"Why?"

"I... I didn't become a vampire because I wanted to. And... I like humans better. I don't want humans to hate me."

Theo did not understand.

Who could possibly hate such a kind and beautiful girl?

Since she was immune to sunlight, no one would find out that she was a vampire unless she said so herself. And even if someone noticed, Theo was sure that they would accept her.

But with the passage of time, his unfounded beliefs slowly began to change.

The boy began to catch up to the girl's height little by little.

After all, the girl hadn't aged a day since they first met.

In a few more years, the two of them would be perfectly matched.

It was around this time that she said something, sounding quite lonely.

"...You're almost my age already."

"Why? You're so much older than me, Big Sis."

"My time stopped long ago." She whispered, and flashed him her usual gentle smile.

"I think... this will be the last time we meet on this island."

"What...?"

At first, he did not understand.

They met as they usually did, and they would say goodbye as they usually did.

That was how things were supposed to be. That routine was what let them spend those happy moments together.

But his fantasies were so easily shattered.

As the boy blankly allowed himself to be embraced, the girl spoke, choking something back.

"But... if, if we ever meet again... I hope we'll be able to start over."

"Wait! What are you saying?!" Theo cried in confusion, grabbing onto the girl's hand.

But her hand slipped out of his fingers as she hugged him so very tightly.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Theo."

"...!"

Her voice was stained with tears. Theo couldn't help but choke back his own bewildered voice.

"If this keeps going... I'll... I'll end up wanting to suck your blood..."

"Big Sis?"

"Because I think... I think I'll end up wanting to turn you..."

He could not understand what she was saying.

He understood the words; but he could not make sense of the meaning behind them.

It was terrifying, being unable to understand the girl he so loved. All of a sudden, it felt as though she had grown very far away. As though he was trapped in a giant bubble, separated from the world.

"But... no more. It's over. If we ever meet again... Then—"

He did not know what she said to him then.

But he never heard the end of her sentence, and the vampire said nothing more.

Her body turned into a large flock of bats, circled once over the boy's head, and disappeared toward the sea in the light of dusk.

He could not even cry out.

He did not know what he should say.

It never even occurred to him to try and stop her from leaving.

After all, it had happened so suddenly that he didn't even understand that this was goodbye.

†

<My gosh...>

It was all Professor could do to vocalize sadly.

Theo slowly stood from his seat and began pacing around the room as he continued his story.

"I didn't understand what she meant at the time, but now I know. This island really is a paradise for vampires."

<So why?>

"But for those who've begun to hate vampires... This island is a dreadfully addictive poison."

<Doctor...>

"But I didn't know any of that. That was why... that was why I tried to become a vampire."

†

The past.

It was about two weeks later that he truly felt the sense of loss.

Though he came to the island like before, she was not there.

He wandered the island, just like he did when he first searched for her.

But instead of the hope he held before, he was torn with fear and despair.

What really captivated him was not her smile, but the melancholy expression she wore for him at the very end.

Why had such a beautiful girl made such a sad face?

He wandered the streets. But he did not find her.

He could not find an answer.

Each time he came back to the island, he repeated the same actions again and again. But he could not find a single vampire, let alone the girl he loved.

Perhaps she was just a fantasy—a dream he made up, he nearly began to think.

But to acknowledge that vampires did not exist meant rejecting the girl's words—rejecting his past with her.

The boy was still too young to understand, but he was certain that he must not disbelieve.

Half a year passed.

The boy finally found the clue he was seeking.

It was getting dark, and shadows were creeping along the ground. A flock of bats were flying across the sky.

There was something strange about the bats. But thinking that perhaps the girl had returned, the boy desperately followed after them, calling her name.

Soon, he spotted the bats flying into a back alley. When he followed them there, they were already gone.

Instead, he found a man.

He had long blond hair and was wearing a long violet coat. The man with the strange air around him had sharp features, and there was something supernatural in the way he carried himself.

'He's a vampire!'

'He's just like Big Sis!'

Unable to hide his excitement, Theo approached the man without an ounce of caution.

The man looked at him dubiously.

"Who are you, child? You don't seem to be merely a boy fascinated with bats."

"Oh... uh... my name is Theodosius Waldstein."

Theo gave the man his name. The man's temple twitched.

"'Waldstein', you say?"

"Oh, umm... I'm looking for a girl. A vampire...! I was wondering if you knew anything..." The boy stammered.

"I see... Tell me more."

The vampire paused for a moment, then stopped and asked for an explanation.

Once Theo told him everything, the man's sharp eyes narrowed into a smile. He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and offered him advice.

"Of course. The girl must have been afraid of losing you."

"...?"

"If that girl was originally human, her body must have stopped aging when she was turned. Then, though she loved you like family, you would one day die before her—and she would realize that she is different from you humans. She must have been unable to bear that realization. At the same time, she did not have the courage to turn you into a vampire."

The vampire in the violet coat chuckled, taking a seat on a nearby box. For some time, Theo listened to the man talk about vampires. But being so young, he could not understand everything the man was saying.

But the one thing he understood for certain,

Was the fact that the girl would never return to Growerth again.

The more the realization resonated in him, the more his body was encased with fear.

It was the sensation of something viscous trembling in the back of his head.

A terrifying feeling, like reality disappearing from before his very eyes.

In his memories, the girl's face grew more and more distorted. And though he thought he should not forget, her image became less and less distinct over time.

'Who is this?'

'Did Big Sis really look like that?'

'No, she was a little more, uh... umm...'

The more clearly he tried to remember, the more his thoughts turned to mud as his memories of her sank into the depths.

There was a noise ringing through his head.

Was it the sound of her screams, or was it the sound of his own moaning?

Theo fell back, leaning against the wall with cold sweat covering his body.

The vampire in the violet coat smiled quietly, silently mocking him.

"Worry not. I have an idea." He said.

His words would go on to change both their fates forever.

"You must take hold of eternity as well. To wander in search of her forever..."

†

"After that... My memory is in pieces. I don't even remember how I left the house that day. My parents... are probably still alive, but I can't go to see them now. Gerhardt made me write to them once, but... I can't go meet them in person."

<...>

Professor wanted to say something, but she forced herself to listen in silence. She knew that Doctor had already thought of everything she wanted to tell him.

"All I know is that... after Melhilm turned me, I took in the blood of so many other vampires. At this point, I don't even know who I am, and who I'm not. It's like my entire heart was taken away by someone. I became a mindless mass murderer, not even a vampire. ...No. I guess... there was something like that in me all along."

†

The past.

How much time had passed since? Theodosius, the ignorant human boy, had become a vampire in the body of a child.

He spent his days being infused with the blood and cells of all kinds of vampires, all in the name of experimentation. But until his wounds healed themselves, each and every test left him in excruciating agony.

He was made to absorb the flesh and blood of countless vampires so he could be made into a powerful vampire himself.

Melhilm never forced him into the experiments. But Theo volunteered himself anyway, driven to become a proper vampire so he could meet the girl again.

But his earnest dreams produced no results.

It was a miracle if he could transform even parts of his body into fog or bats. He was nearly incapable of subjugating or turning humans. Essentially, he was a vampire in name only—and considering his weaknesses as a vampire, he was below even humans.

"In the end, you came to become nothing." Said the man who turned him. But Theo did not react.

"Go where you will. You may be a failure, but your body is stable, and you will likely greatly outlive humans. Though I suppose that is the only advantage you have... but in any case, be well."

'I'm going to be abandoned.'

Though his sense of self was on the verge of collapse, he still retained enough sanity to understand what was happening to him.

"..."

With the last dregs of his rationality, the boy muttered the name of the girl who had pulled him into the world of vampires.

Melhilm stopped. There was a look of disgust on his face.

"Yes... I did look into her. Another officer told me that he located her."

But his disgust seemed to be directed at neither Theo nor the girl.

It was meant for 'something' that was not present there.

"I do not know the details, but... I was told that she was killed by humans."

"_____"

At that moment, everything came to a standstill. Melhilm must have noticed Theo's shock, for he stopped walking away.

"We Organization members are not the ones you should be blaming. The girl died before you and I even met."

However, the boy did not even react.

The light in his eyes faded. His gaze missed the reality before him.

'Poor thing.'

Determining that Theo had been completely broken, Melhilm wondered if he should kill him on the spot to end his misery. But in the end, he decided against it.

"...I don't know if you can still hear me. But if you ever come to your senses, return to the island of Growerth. Someone there will be able to save you."

Melhilm's words did indeed reach the boy.

But it would be a very long time before the boy understood and accepted them.

At the moment, there was nothing going through his mind but the echoes of despair.

'Abandoned.

'Abandoned.

'I've been abandoned. By something.

'I've been abandoned. By me.

'I abandoned. I abandoned everything.

'That was why. You were abandoned.'

Over the course of the experiments, countless 'somethings' had been infused into his being.

They trembled and swayed together, becoming a great wave that violently shook his heart.

'Just as you abandoned humanity, you have been abandoned.

'Don't leave me.

'You have been abandoned by everything. It is all over now. Over now. Goodbye. Goodbye.

'Don't leave me.

'Goodbye. Fare you well. I hope you one day bloom beautifully in a sunlit park.'

Even the 'somethings' slowly began to crumble, ringing hollow and meaningless in the boy's mind, leaving him in confusion and despair.

'You! Have been abandoned. You've been abandoned. I don't want a meaningless life.

'I don't! I don't! I don't!

'Goodbye. Goodbye. You have been chosen, but the sky is blue. Take out your handkerchief and do some embroidery with that pool of blood. So that you will not become garbage.'

One jumble of meaningless utterances after another.

But the very sound of those voices tore the boy's heart apart, whittling down his sense of self into a minuscule scrap of being.

'Don't leave me! I'm not a failure!

'I'm a vampire. Just like Big Sis!

'So, so, so, I'm not going to give her to you. Not to humans, not to the world, never, ever ever!

'So, so? So! So? So so so so so so so so so so so so so so so so so—

'Goodbye.'

The last of the voices he heard reminded him of the girl.

But at that point, the consciousness and existence of the boy named Theodosius came to an end. In his place was left a horribly broken 'something' that would one day come to be called a mass murderer.

That was the beginning of the tragedy.

†

"After that... it's exactly as the rumors say."

<Doctor...>

"Maybe, back then, I didn't even know what I hated and what I didn't hate. I have almost no memories from that point onward, but it's not like I could say I was unaware of what was happening. That's why... I have to be the subject of humans' revenge, for all eternity. Even if this is just for self-satisfaction."

<But Doctor... you came back to your senses, didn't you?>

Professor wanted to say that Doctor wouldn't be there talking to her if that wasn't the case. But Doctor just looked up at the ceiling and mumbled.

"If you were to ask me if I'm relieved that I came to my senses... I'd say I'm glad I didn't create any more casualties. Although I would have preferred that I was killed while I was still insane, I don't have the right to be that lucky—"

<But I'm so happy that you're here with me, Doctor.>

"Thank you, Professor."

There was a shadow of a smile on Theo's face. Professor made a sound like a sigh of relief.

"...But I'm still worried about Rudi and Theresia. Gerhardt told me that Theresia's been subjugated by a vampire who's not affiliated with the Organization. I'm still gathering information on that vampire now. I hate to admit it, but my information network doesn't reach overseas."

<Ohh! So that's why you've been contacting so many vampires recently!> Professor said, finally understanding what Doctor had been doing. Seeing that, Doctor quietly stood and headed for the door.

<Doctor.>

"What is it? I've told you everything—"

<No, you haven't. I still haven't heard about Elsa... the person I used to be before I was born.>

"..."

Doctor was clearly avoiding the subject, but Professor had come to a resolution of sorts.

<Won't you please tell me, Doctor? About Elsa, and how she lived alongside you?>

†

Southern Germany. On a balcony in the Mars family country house.

"Hey, I told you to wait! Why're you running away?!"

Michael's chase was taking place on a balcony so large it was a veritable rooftop garden.

All around them were stone sculptures of video game characters. Upon closer inspection, they might have looked comically out of place. But at the moment, neither Michael nor the young man he was running after had the time to spare observing the scenery.

"Agh... Uwaa..."

The young man was terrified.

But his voice was indeed familiar to Michael.

He was the Eater who had come to Growerth six months ago, on the first day of the festival.

The Eater in black armor who drove a stake through Ferret's chest.

Michael was justified in being unable to forgive the man who had hurt Ferret so.

'But...'

What was he supposed to say, Michael wondered. He could not think of the words.

Should he raise his voice and demand that the young man apologize to Ferret?

'But maybe Ferret wouldn't want that.'

Should he throw out every profanity he knew?

'That doesn't sound right, either.'

Should he tell him to never approach the island again?

'I'd have to make him apologize to Ferret before that.'

Or should he offer forgiveness, as though nothing had happened?

'I can't do that. I'm not Ferret, so I don't have the right to make decisions like that for her.'

If Ferret hadn't come out of the attack in one piece, Michael would have lashed out fist-first without a moment's hesitation.

Or if the young man were to attack Ferret again, Michael would have no qualms about swearing at him.

But Ferret was not there, and Michael sensed no hostility from the young man. In fact, he looked more terrified at his presence than anything.

'Hmm... what do I do?'

Michael fell into thought, forgetting one important fact.

That young man had tried to kill him, and was responsible for leaving his right hand paralyzed.

That was why forgiveness was not an option for Michael.

Not only had he forgotten that he had the right to forgive, he also thought that he had no right to offer forgiveness on behalf of Ferret.

†

In front of the dining hall.

"Truly an incredible young man, that Michael. The most entertaining example of humanity." Doubs mumbled. Fannie looked up, wiping drool from his mouth.

"...Huh? Wh-what?"

Doubs sighed.

"Have you been enraptured by the photo of the girl *all this time*? That lolita complex of yours is positively criminal... Tsk tsk tsk. I was talking about the boy who was here with us until a moment ago."

"Oh, right. What about him?"

"I was saying that he was an excellently entertaining young man." Doubs smiled faintly, hiding his eyes under the brim of his hat. "Though he is capable of accepting and embracing

everything around himself, he is at the same time unable to see himself. How could he? Other than his feelings for a certain young lady, of course, it's almost frightful how little he values himself over others. That is precisely the reason why he so easily accepts us superhuman creatures."

"I don't really get what you're saying, but I don't think Michael's a bad guy."

"Of course! To vampires, he could be an object of admiration or an unnecessary piece of trash. After all, he is capable of embracing and befriending anyone at all, whether human or vampire."

"That's a good thing, then. If only he were five years younger and a girl..."

Fannie seemed to be wondering what it was about Michael that could make him unnecessary. Doubs snickered.

"Because if you befriend him, it would be nothing short of effortless to stab him in the back."

"...You're disgusting, Mr. Doubs."

"And to add, he discriminates too little. In many cases, good people like him who can befriend anyone are often suspected of hypocrisy. After all, the more blackhearted you are, the more likely you are to measure others by your own standards."

There was nothing particularly funny about his explanation, but Doubs cackled uncontrollably, slowly getting to his feet.

"To be blunt, Michael currently stands in a precariously perilous position. He is a small, frail bridge standing between the worlds of humans and vampires. A single wisp of wind will whirl him away to oblivion."

Shaking the dust off his clothes and fixing up his hat, Doubs made a confession.

"Honestly, I'm very excited. If Michael were to be constantly exposed to the dark side of vampires and humans, would he ultimately accept them as well, or reject them? Or will he show us a completely different possibility? My heart is pounding in anticipation. Isn't yours?"

Fannie glared, grimacing.

"You're sounding a lot like a villain, Mr. Doubs."

The man in the top hat shook his head dramatically, his iridescent clothing shifting colors in the light.

"Nay! I am simply satisfied with anything that gives me amusement. And for the sake of entertainment, I could easily become a villain, a saint, a hypocrite, a *faux* villain, a Messiah, a Devil, a neighbor, an observer, a mastermind, a victim, or even a *traitor*!" Doubs cried with gusto, gesticulating theatrically as he stepped into the dining hall.

"After all, that is why I am known as the Iridescent Extra!"

†

On a highway in Southern Germany.

At the end of Dorothy's explanation, Ferret found herself beset by a complex emotion.

"I see... so that Eater is no longer capable of fighting properly..."

"That's right. He survived because Garde subjugated the cells in his body, but at this point, it might be an exaggeration to say he's fully alive. He can't go back to the way he was before. Physically... and emotionally."

"..."

Rudi Wenders.

An Eater Ferret could never forget.

He was the man who had mutilated her with stakes and left Michael's right hand paralyzed.

She could not forgive him.

Nothing could allow her to forgive him.

Doctor had told her about his past. She understood why the man had been consumed by revenge.

But understanding alone was not enough to halt the flood of emotions.

For some time after the incident, she could not stop worrying that she would end up killing him the next time they met.

But that worry was erased completely when she saw Michael smiling on his hospital bed.

Of course, Michael had also been angry at the Eater. But that was anger for the fact that Ferret was hurt. He was not angry about his own injuries—his near-brush with death and the paralysis of his hand.

"But still... I am worried."

Gently gripping the hem of her skirt, Ferret spoke with her head bowed.

"I think... Michael will forgive even the man who tried to kill him. That utter *absence* of a sense of self-preservation, and his kindness... it concerns me so much that I do not understand what I must do!"

"But that's exactly why you fell for him, isn't it?" Dorothy commented.

"Wh-wha...?!"

Ferret could not hide her shock. Dorothy continued, looking straight ahead.

"I've never met that boy named Michael, but if Gerhardt is right about him, I'm sure he'll become someone you can truly count on."

"..."

It was true.

Ferret had indeed been saved in countless ways by Michael.

And setting that aside, she did not want to lose him. She could not.

It felt for a moment like her heart was screaming.

'I miss him.'

She didn't care about rules and propriety. She didn't care about the specifics of the feelings she had for Michael.

All Ferret knew was that the wall she had been constantly building up in her heart was being shaken violently.

'I'll see him soon... Then I'll give him a proper smack... and then...

'...And then...?'

Ferret remained silent. Dorothy spoke up gently.

"That's why you should support Michael, too. Don't you agree?"

"...Me...? Support Michael?"

"Of course. You see, it's very dangerous to embrace everything, like Michael does. Whether you're a human or a vampire. People like him will accept everything without a thought—even if it's poison, or something they just can't handle. In the end, they end up breaking themselves."

Smiling, Dorothy then added:

"That's why Gerhardt took on that form. ...So that he wouldn't end up broken."

†

Several minutes later, on the balcony.

"It's okay. Calm down. I'm not gonna kill you, okay?"

"Agh... Ahhhh..."

He was like a child running from an abusive adult.

That was all the young man looked like.

Was he really the same Eater who fought in the suit of armor, Michael wondered. But he held back his question and tried to speak to the young man.

The young man was probably older than him, but Michael did not particularly feel like treating him with deference. But then again, he did not particularly feel any hatred for him, either.

The young man still looked terrified. Michael decided to make an attempt at conversation.

"Hey... Relic told me what happened. I understand why you hate Doctor so much, but why'd you attack Ferret?"

"..."

"..."

A heavy silence came upon them. The air felt murky.

But Michael still waited for an answer.

He would have been satisfied with even just a hint of understanding.

But the young man only trembled, shaking his head.

He was mumbling something like a man possessed.

"?"

Michael listened carefully. The young man was repeating himself in a fearful voice.

"No... they can't..."

"What do you mean?" Michael asked. The young man flinched and looked into his eyes.

"Humans and vampires... th-they can't... sh-shouldn't get along. It's impossible."

It sounded like he was chastising himself, rather than answering Michael's question.

"Humans and vampires... getting along...? That's impossible... It has to be! If not... wh-what about people who couldn't...? What about people like me...?"

"..."

Perhaps he was not quite in his right mind. The young man was not talking to Michael.

But knowing some of the story behind him, Michael looked up at the starry sky, leaning against a pillar. He somehow understood what the young man was trying to say.

"You... what about you...? Tell me! Do you *really* think humans and vampires can get along? They've never betrayed you—they've never made you taste despair. So how could you

blindly believe that things will work out for you?! How... how could you put your *life* on the line for that faith?!"

"..."

How was Michael to respond?

Although his feelings for Ferret never wavered, he never thought of the greater relationships between the two species.

In that sense, the relationship between Doctor and this Eater was also a personal one that didn't necessarily speak for other human-vampire relationships. But Michael decided to take a moment to think.

But a moment's thought could not possibly give him an answer.

'I heard that the mayor's half human and half vampire. I wonder what his parents were like?

'Relic is my friend, and it feels like being a human or a vampire doesn't really matter on Growerth.'

At that point, Michael realized that the state of Growerth was itself what the young man so wanted to deny, and thought in a new direction.

He paused for a moment, his eyes shining. Then, Michael broke out into self-deprecating laughter.

"Yeah... you might be right."

"What...?"

The young man looked up. Their eyes met. This time, it was Michael's turn to chastise himself.

"Maybe it's true that humans and vampires aren't meant to get along. Maybe it *is* impossible."

"..."

"But still... I still love Ferret. That's all."

On the surface, Michael's confession seemed to have nothing to do with the topic at hand.

"You'll be betrayed... You'll lose everything, just like I did... everyone you love... murdered..."

"I won't say that I'll still be happy if that happens. If Ferret killed Hilda or my parents... I think I'd be real angry and sad. But... I can't really explain, but... even if that's what happens to me in the future, I still love Ferret. There's nothing I can do about that."

It sounded almost like Michael was bragging about his girlfriend. But there was something lonely about the way he explained things.

"Y'know. It's too late. I'm already in love with her. There's nothing I can do. There just isn't."

He was almost angry that he could not explain why he so loved Ferret.

"'Cause I think it's different, y'know. Me liking Ferret is completely different from understanding vampires."

"..."

The young man went silent for a moment.

Eventually, he realized that nothing would be enough to change Michael's mind. He sighed loudly and looked at Michael with both sympathy and envy.

"...This is the only chance you have. Once you lose someone dear to you, you'll—"

"Oh, there you are. What were you and Rudi talking about? Anyway, I'm glad no one drew blood or anything." Fannie called from the manor entrance, cutting the conversation short.

"Michael. Mr. Doubs says you have to get ready now. It's almost time for your job."

"Really? ...Hey, Rudi? We'll talk more later."

Not knowing a thing about the job he was assigned, Michael tried to leave the balcony as quickly as he could.

But at that point, Fannie also called out to the Eater.

"And Rudi."

"Ah..."

"You have to come along, too. And I'll be going with you, so let's try and get along."

"Wha..." Rudi breathed, taking to his feet.

Michael didn't seem to mind either way, but he suddenly remembered something and whispered to Fannie.

"Hey, so what's my job s'posed to be, anyway? I thought I was supposed to help hand out documents at the conference or something, but they already got that started."

It was a natural question to ask.

But it was, perhaps, much too belated a question.

If Ferret were there to hear, she would have scolded him for not asking for such important information before accepting the job. But Fannie didn't seem to hold such concerns.

"Oh. Guess they didn't tell you. Actually, I just raised my hand to volunteer a little while ago. We're going to protect a girl in this city to the east. We need the two of you to help out."

†

At the same time, the dining hall.

"Ladies! Gentlemen! Doggie bones! Ah, my lofty yet insolent friends! I am greatly grateful that you joined us here from lands both near and distant! I welcome you here from the bottom of my heart, so I ask that you extend the same warmth to me!"

Half the members greeted the dramatic, iridescent man with cheers and applause, but the other half frowned visibly.

[Tsk, tsk. You are late, Doubs. ...Actually, I have been meaning to ask you. I received an email from Growerth and was wondering if you'd brought along a guest.]

"Hah hah hah! Let us save that discussion for later, Viscount Waldstein." Doubs said affably. He walked up to the middle of the dining hall and looked around himself.

Filling the hall were vampires of every sort, from the humanoid to the veritably unearthly. With the gazes of countless creatures of power on his person, Doubs trembled in ecstasy as he began his speech.

"Now, I have been keeping a keen ear on the proceedings from outside. And setting aside the specifics of the incident, it seems that you haven't yet found out a thing about the *hidden* side of the case."

A man in a violet coat—Melhilm Herzog—frowned at Doubs' roundabout introduction.

"You act as though you already know everything there is to understand about this incident."

"Well, yes."

Doubs answered with surprising promptness. The dining hall was quickly filled with the sound of murmurs.

Reveling in the voices directed toward him, the Iridescent Extra snapped his fingers together and called for a certain officer.

"QAWSED? The files, please."

<Got it.>

A metallic voice was projected from every single laptop in the room.

But the owner of the voice was nowhere to be found. He only showed himself through his voice.

<But it's not like we've got a lotta time on our hands, yanno? I heard her house caught fire just yesterday.>

The being called QAWSED was the officer with the moniker 'Hackey Mouse'. He spoke directly to the attendees through their computers.

<And the enemy's started movin', too. We're gonna have trouble if they don't get outta there soon.>

"What do you mean, 'enemy'?" "Who's that?" "What are you saying, Hackey Mouse?"

The officers looked around at one another in confusion. Doubs shook his head with a sigh.

"My goodness. This doesn't seem to be the best time for a laid-back chat."

Putting on a suspiciously malicious grin on his face, he began to reveal the secrets of the incident.

"Allow me to make this clear from the outset. Vampires were indeed involved in this incident."

Striking a strange pose with his arms, Doubs lost himself in narcissism and trembled in excitement.

"...What do you think, everyone? Whatever the truth may be, don't you think it will at least be an interesting way to pass the time?"

†

Several hours later. On the Mars estate.

Dorothy's car had already passed through the front gates and entered the grounds.

"The conference must be underway already, or it might have finished; in that case, everyone should be exchanging greetings and taking some time to relax together."

"Relaxing together...?"

It was not particularly an phrase Ferret could connect with her image of the Organization. She wondered if 'relaxing together' was a code of some sort for a more sinister activity.

But remembering her own father, Ferret changed her mind and told herself that the phrase probably did not have any hidden meanings.

"Is... is Father all right?"

"Yes. He's a trustworthy man, after all. Even vampires like Mirald the Mirror or Garde the Black defer to Gerhardt."

"But I was told that Father once betrayed the Organization."

"He didn't betray us. It was just that the island was more important to him. And... we just had to go our separate ways. The only one here who's honestly hostile to Gerhardt is probably Caldimir."

Although Ferret did not know much about Caldimir, she remembered hearing the name from Gerhardt on occasion.

But what kind of an organization was this to give a deserter his membership back so easily?

Until now, Ferret had assumed that the Organization existed for some dark purposes. But after a long talk with Dorothy, one of its members, she found herself realizing just how far her guess had gone off the mark.

But on the other hand, the Organization was indeed responsible for everything involving her and Relic, Doctor's tragedy, and the armored Eater and his partner.

Not knowing what to believe in anymore, Ferret made up her mind to judge for herself through the things she saw with her own two eyes.

Of course, considering that the Organization had made an attempt on her brother in the past, she could not let her guard down.

Being as cautious as possible, Ferret continued to speak with Dorothy.

"...Why... did you decide to create the Organization in the first place...?"

Dorothy's smile darkened for a moment. She remained quiet for a few seconds, before finally opening her mouth to speak.

"That's right... I left you hanging just earlier, didn't I? Yes. I was the one who suggested the idea to Gerhardt. To be honest, at the time, I didn't like him very much. He was striving to achieve co-existence with humans. I thought he was a despicable hypocrite."

"..."

There was no anger in her voice as she recounted her memories with Gerhardt. Ferret knew clearly from her long drive with Dorothy that her love for Gerhardt was true.

"...But the fundamentals of the Organization haven't changed since those days."

†

Centuries earlier. Somewhere in Northern Europe.

"An alliance?"

The sound of a young man's voice echoed on the lakeshore that evening.

The stars were shining brightly that night, but the hut on the shore was veiled in snow.

One of the many figures gathered inside, a Russian man, pushed up his round glasses and shook his head.

"And here I was, wondering just what incredible scheme you were going to suggest. Go back to Gerhardt and tell him this, Dorothy Nifas. What reason do we have to create an alliance if we have no goals in common?" The man snorted.

Others cut into the conversation, chiding the man.

"We should listen to this proposal to the end, Caldimir."

"Yeah. If you don't hear people out properly, you'll miss out when they talk behind your back, Mr. Caldimir."

The two who spoke up were an unusual duo, likely a pair of twins.

There were five or six other vampires with them in the hut. They were leaning against the walls or sitting in chairs as they lent their ears to Dorothy.

Dorothy, supposedly there on Gerhardt's behalf, explained in a mechanical, ice-cold tone.

"I don't mean to imply that we *need* a common purpose. We vampires, though much more powerful than humans, are being persecuted by those weaker beings because we cannot use our abilities effectively. Let me remind you that vampires who do not belong to Clans are being wiped out without even a show of resistance."

"Hmph. Weaklings' excuses. Gerhardt is a man who thinks only of foolish ideas like living side-by-side with humans. His purposes will never align with ours. ...Damn it. This was a waste of time."

Caldimir, who from the start had no intention of agreeing, turned away and walked off to the snowy lakeshore.

Instead of trying to stop him, Dorothy turned to the other vampires.

"Do you all agree?"

The others looked around at one another, uncertain. But two of them spoke up, at least on their own behalves.

"...We are indebted to Sir Gerhardt. Though we agree that his ideals are naive, we don't think his opinions should be ignored so easily."

"Mr. Gerhardt's the one who saved us when we were brats about to be killed by humans. I don't like humans a lot, but I like the clothes and pictures they make. And if you think about it, some vampires eat humans, too. This isn't exactly a one-sided witch hunt."

"...Of course. That is precisely why Gerhardt wants to create an organization that acts as an information network and a venue for communication. His goal is nothing so grand as creating a new country." Dorothy clarified, and looked up at the vampires.

She spoke clearly and beautifully, though her voice was tinged with ice.

"...It is of utmost importance that we gather numbers in order to create as large a network of information as possible. In other words... I would like to ask every vampire here to go to as many places as they can. Contact every vampire with whom we can communicate... of course, with the exception of the Clans."

As the conversation in the hut continued, Caldimir was about a hundred meters away, still walking.

He took in the sights around the lake for a moment, but grew sick of it. He was just about to transform into a flock of bats.

"Wait, Caldimir."

A snow-white bat flew over and stopped him, speaking in human tongue.

"...What do you want, Dorothy Nifas? You are not going to change my mind at this point."

"No. Right now, I am speaking to you not on Gerhardt's behalf, but my own."

"...What?"

The bat clung onto Caldimir's shoulder and whispered into his ear.

"You also want revenge, don't you? Against the Clans who rejected you."

"..."

Caldimir stopped.

"...How much do you know."

"A little bird told me, Caldimir. Now, to make myself clear, I despise humans. Gerhardt's position nauseates me."

"That's funny. I thought you and Gerhardt were lovers."

Caldimir was suspicious. But the bat that spoke for Dorothy continued to whisper with ice in her voice.

"I only wish to use his position as the adopted son of a human noble. To penetrate human society with the power of vampires. That is all."

"..."

"Your goals are different, yes. You wish to humiliate the Clans, who exercise power even over humans. But for that, you need power yourself."

The white bat hissed in a bid for conspiracy.

"In other words... all you need to do is follow my lead and use Gerhardt's position and his little organization. Am I wrong, Caldimir?"

Caldimir stood for some time without saying a word. But his lips eventually twisted into a grin as he turned around and headed back to the hut.

"...You're a filthy whore, Dorothy Nifas. Selling your body to Gerhardt for something like that?" He sneered. The bat replied in a bone-chilling tone.



"I do not recall selling even my heart to that naive *child*."

†

"I was young back then. I didn't even realize that I was a child, just like Gerhardt."

Dorothy revealed even the darkest pieces of her past to Ferret.

Ferret had no idea how to respond. She sat there in silence.

Dorothy was smiling as she told her story, but Ferret could not see it as a laughing matter.

This was even worse than her initial suspicions of Dorothy being after the family's wealth. But after some thought, Ferret looked at Dorothy.

"But now... you are different, no?"

"Hm?"

"To use your own words... You have sold even your heart to Father."

Dorothy averted her gaze and smiled shyly.

"I suppose you're right. Of course, I never imagined at the time that I would really come to love Gerhardt."

"What happened to change your mind?"

"Well... Oh my."

Dorothy stopped before she could begin, looking around and stopping the car.

"I'm sorry. Could we finish this conversation later?"

"What is it? ...Oh."

Ferret looked up. The doors of the country house were already right in front of them, and there were a group of people—likely vampires—crowded around the entrance.

"It's a very long story, and... well, it would be embarrassing to talk about it in front of Gerhardt."

With that, Dorothy backed the car into a parking space.

Ferret could not hide her awe at the manor, vast like Waldstein Castle but so different from her home. It was the kind of residence she imagined for the noblemen and vampires she tried to imitate.

"Let's get to Gerhardt, first. Michael should be with him."

"Oh. Yes..."

Ferret nodded and stepped off the car.

'What do I do?'

She would see Michael soon. As the fact sunk in, she realized that her heart was pounding.

The first thing she would do was beat him to a pulp.

Her conversation with Dorothy had cooled her down greatly. Ferret began to think, remembering why she had gone to Michael's house in the first place.

'That doesn't matter anymore. When I see him, I'll tell him how I really feel.'

Although she put on a mask of utter calm, inside she was lost in confusion and resigned to her fate.

If she met him now, she might burst into tears.

She could tell what would happen. But Ferret steeled herself and stepped forward.

"What?!"

At that moment, Dorothy, who had gone to the door first and spoken to the vampires there, cried out in surprise.

"Doubts, that troublemaker... Ohh..."

Dorothy sighed with a hand on her forehead. Ferret came up to her.

"Um... is something the matter?"

"Well... I'm sorry, Ferret. I think we must have just missed him."

"?"

"Get in."

Dorothy called Ferret to the car before even explaining what had happened. She looked at her future daughter with a mix of anxiety and resignation, and mumbled apologetically.

"It's about Michael. ...I think he might be in a bit of danger."

Chapter 5: Vampires...!

A forest in southern Germany.

"Argh... Damn it... What the hell are those freaks?!"

A small car raced through the woods.

Horst was in the driver's seat, constantly glancing at the rear-view mirror.

'They're vampires! They've got to be vampires!' He told himself over and over as he tried to shake off the looming dread that pursued him.

The reason he kept his thoughts to himself was because he was concerned about Alma, who was sitting next to him in the passenger seat.

But no matter how hard he tried to shake his pursuers, they persistently dogged his heels. He felt trapped. He was about to be crushed by despair.

'Damn it... Shit! Shit!'

'Why the hell did this happen?'

'Why won't they just leave us alone?'

'What did Alma do to deserve this?! What did she ever do to them?'

'Why...?! Why?!'

He cursed their pursuers in his head, but he could not stem the constant flow of fear.

He glanced at the passenger seat. Alma sat with her arms crossed, embracing herself. Her tiny form was visibly trembling.

Horst saw his honest self reflected in the little girl. His fears only grew worse.

'Damn it... how did this happen...?'

†

Several hours earlier.

"Let's get out of here."

Alma turned.

"My folks live over in Munich. It'll be easier to live there, and I can commute to work here from their place."

"But..."

"It'll be better than renting an apartment here."

"...I'm sorry... This is all my fault."

Alma hung her head. Horst smiled at her reassuringly.

"C'mon, Alma. I told you not to worry. The people who started the fire are the bad guys. Anyway, have you ever been to Munich? Everyone there's great. They're not like the touchy people here. And you've heard of Oktoberfest, right? We get millions of tourists from all over the world, and they even set up a theme park in the square!"

Horst raved with as much enthusiasm as he could muster—not so much for Alma as for himself.

But even he was falling prey to fear.

On the way back from the police station, Horst received a phone call from the man who used to deliver mail to the village before him.

The man was in the hospital. He said that he had been pushed off a flight of stairs.

When Horst went to see him, the older postman said,

"Did you by any chance find any strange graffiti on your house? You'd better keep an eye out if you did."

The older man did not seem to know that Horst's house had already been burned down.

But it became another explicit sign of the fear that strangled his thoughts.

The older postman had nothing to do with the incident, and he had stopped going to the village a long time ago. So why did even he have to suffer?

"Well... I was at the bar the other day when I heard some bastards say these awful things about Alma. I gave them a stern lecture, and afterwards, I've been getting harassed like this every once in a while."

The older postman said that he had not seen his attacker, either.

He had seen suspicious people around, yes. But sometimes they were men, sometimes they were women, sometimes they were office workers, and sometimes they were young thugs. There was no common ground connecting those people, and he could not even begin to figure out who could have been responsible.

But Horst knew.

His fellow postman had probably been attacked by them all.

It was an invisible coagulation of malice.

Everyone they ran into sympathetically met Alma's gaze.

No one showed any signs of fear or dislike.

But among them were the arsonists and those who would agree with their actions.

Horst decided to escape from that; he made up his mind to leave the city with Alma.

Alma did not wish to remain in the city, either. But she reminded Horst that as long as he continued to protect her, he would also be persecuted. Horst, however, could not leave her.

Perhaps he was not motivated by altruism alone.

If he abandoned Alma at this point, he would find himself just like the other people of the city—someone who abandoned a little girl because he was defeated by fear.

He was being sympathetic; he was also being stubborn.

Gripped by the thought that he was now fighting against the entire city, it even occurred to Horst to set fire to the entire neighborhood. But he caught himself before the line of thought went anywhere, and decided to leave town before he lost his mind.

He clenched his fists tightly, swearing that he would never become like the people around him.

The moment of fate was upon them.

They bought the bare necessities at a nearby store, loaded the car with some changes of clothes, and began the drive to Munich. At the post office, Horst filled in a form requesting a leave of absence. But he thought to himself that, depending on the situation, he might never return to the city again.

When the sun slowly began to set, they decided to spend the night at a roadside motel.

Finally liberated from the city, Horst felt free.

There was something unbearably murky about the air there. It had felt as though they were a pair of saltwater fish pushed in with a school of fish in the river.

But if the rumors were true, Alma was essentially a shark to the people of the city. The freshwater fish, unable to even vent their frustrations, could do nothing but try to eliminate the supposed threat from the shadows.

Even though a shark could not survive in fresh water very long.

Horst looked out at the city and ground his teeth at the injustice.

The motel was built partly in the forest, and the area was deserted.

There was a strangely eerie chill in the air.

At that point, Alma came up to Horst, speaking so quietly he could barely hear.

"Say..."

"Hm? What is it, Alma?"

"If... if I was a vampire... what would you do?"

Horst sighed, astonished.

"Hey, don't you start believing those rumors too, Alma. Don't worry. Vampires don't—"

"But what *if*?"

Alma cut him off forcefully.

Rattled by the gravity of her tone, Horst pulled back his forced grin and listened seriously.

"...If?"

"If I'm really a vampire, just like the people say... are you going to kill me too, Horst? Are you going to stab me in the heart, or set me on fire, or—"

"Don't be stupid!" Horst cried without thinking. He quickly looked at Alma apologetically.

But she did not look surprised at all by his outburst. Alma only looked up at him somberly.

Horst could feel guilt welling up inside. It was just like the time she looked up at him sadly as they left the police station.

"Don't be stupid... If you really are a vampire—if you've really been bitten and turned into a vampire—I'll do whatever it takes to turn you back."

He was trying to reassure her.

But the moment he finished, the look on Alma's face darkened even more.

However, she was not blaming him. It looked more like she was in despair at her own state of being.

"So... being a vampire is wrong?"

"A-Alma...?"

"I... I have to be a human, or it's wrong. Right?"

He tried to say something.

But Horst could not manage a voice. His lungs worked in vain to try and produce an utterance.

He knew he had to say something, but he could not find the words.

'It can't be.'

His throat was dry. His tongue was dry, and even his nose and eyes.

It felt like water was evaporating from his face.

'Or maybe... could she...?'

'No... it just...'

He could not bring himself to complete his thought.

The incident at the village was already something beyond common sense.

How could so many people disappear without leaving so much as a single drop of blood?

If anyone was capable of doing such a thing, it had to be a monster, like a vampire. That was the only conclusion he could jump to.

Creatures of fantasy began to grow clearer in the fog of fear.

If this was an ordinary conversation, or a warm family dinner, he could probably say,

'Even if you are a vampire, you and I are still family.'

But there was a weight to Alma's words that stopped him from speaking.

It was not the time for a thoughtless answer.

It was not the time to ignore Alma.

Horst tried to say that he didn't care whether she was a vampire. But his dried-out tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, preventing him from saying anything meaningful.

"...Al...ma..."

He barely managed to call her name.

That was his limit.

"...I'm sorry for asking such a weird question." Alma said with a smile, shaking her head.

But her eyes were clearly tinged with sadness.

'What did I just do...?'

'I swore I would protect her!'

'So why the hell... why the hell did I end up hurting her instead...?'

At that moment, his thoughts came grinding to a halt.

There was a mirror hanging on the wall, on the other side of the room.

Reflected in its surface were his own frozen face, and the scene out the window behind him.

He thought he saw something move in that scene.

"...? Horst?"

Noticing Horst's expression, Alma turned. She gasped in a half-scream.

Behind Horst, outside the window, she saw the flickering of countless lights.

The lights.

Trembling and trembling,

Trembling and trembling,

Shakily the lights glowed in the dark. Although they were not headlights, it was clear that they were quickly spreading into the woods.

It was as though the motel was being surrounded by will-o-wisp.

Horst slowly turned. But he could not tell what the lights were.

They were most likely from flashlights and lanterns.

But what was going on with the lights, right now in the dead of night?

Horst tried to force his hazy fears into a question.

But he was interrupted by Alma.

"Ah... Aaaahhh..."

She was pale as a sheet, and her shoulders were trembling.

"Th-those..."

"Hey, what's wrong?!"

"The village... they're the ones who..."

Alma did not finish her sentence.

She must have remembered something specific. Tears began to fall from her terrified eyes.

But that alone was enough.

Chilled to the bone, Horst desperately fought the urge to fall to his knees in terror as he whispered to Alma,

"...Let's get out of here."

He quickly moved away from the window.

Alma, still trembling, did not take a single step.

Horst picked her up in his arms and ran out of the room with nothing but his car keys in hand.

†

The chase began.

How far had he driven his car?

Horst stepped on the gas pedal like his life depended on it, trying to shake off the lights that came after them. But the glow spread endlessly, as though filling the entire forest.

By the time he spotted lights in the distance directly ahead of them, Horst's determination began to run out.

But when he turned on the headlights, he saw figures in the distance.

'Those are people.'

The realization jolted Horst back into reality.

"Those are *people*...! What the hell is this?! Shit!" He cried into the air, but Alma replied to him.

"I... I don't know what they were... They were humans, but they weren't. And... that night, they came to the village and... and...!"

She had said the same thing at the police station before.

That the villagers had been attacked by something.

That was the only fact that mattered to Alma. Nothing else.

Or at least, that was how things should have been.

Alma was keeping one secret that she did not disclose to either Horst or the police.

It was a secret she could not reveal.

After all, revealing the truth would not change reality.

Even if she confessed, the police would assume that she was traumatized and out of her mind, or that the incident had its roots in some religious conflict. And because neither supposition was true, it could not solve the mystery behind the disappearances.

There was a good reason why she did not confess the truth.

The truth was something she could not tell even Horst.

It was a secret she should shoulder—no, carry—to the grave.

Alma was about to bite her lip when she spotted something ahead.

It was a large trailer, blocking off the road.

"Hey... What the hell is this?!" Horst cried, hitting the brakes.

From the shadows on the truck, multiple shadows emerged—all carrying lanterns.

"...The hell..."

He did not know what was coming after them.

And whether or not he knew, Horst could tell that his life was in danger. He was certain of that.

The figures illuminated by the headlights were, from their necks down, completely normal. People in suits, people in T-shirts, and even women in skirts.

But their heads—including their hair—were covered completely.

Some had cloth wrapped around their heads. Some wore hats, sunglasses, and hospital masks. Some wore full-face masks, and carnival masks sold in souvenir stores. It was an incredible assortment of faces, but the completely ordinary clothes worn by the bodies under the heads lent an eerie air to the scene.

'I don't know what those freaks are up to... but we're in trouble. They're different from the people in the city who're trying to hurt Alma.'

The people, holding flashlights in their hands, silently walked over in the direction of the car.

"...Hold on tight, Alma."

Horst took a deep breath.

He turned the steering wheel and drove the car into the mountains.

Several minutes later.

Horst could still see lights in the mountains reflected in the rear-view mirror.

Just how many of them were there?

A group numbering at well over several dozen was driving them into the mountains and hunting them down.

'...Don't tell me... are they vampires?'

Remembering the shadows of the 'Others' he considered only a legend, Horst floored the gas pedal.

Eventually, the slope of the mountain grew steeper, and the car would not go forward. When he tried to back the car, the wheels spun, caught in the rocks.

"Damn it! ...They're going to find us if we stick with the car. We'll have to run on foot!"

"R-right..."

They stepped out of the car and stumbled up the mountain.

Several minutes later.

They climbed blindly up the slope, trying not to look behind them as they fled without a destination.

"Eek!"

Alma slipped. Horst quickly grabbed her hand.

"You all right?!"

"Y-yeah."

He tried to pull her back up, but the slope had gotten so steep that it took them some time to get back on track.

If Horst hadn't gotten used to climbing rough terrain as he delivered mail to Alma's village, he would have long ago slipped and fallen.

But they could not linger much longer.

When he pulled Alma back up, Horst found himself glancing at the path down which they came. He could see the macabre lights flickering like stars under them in the woods.

"Damn it... we ditched the car, so we have to find a place to hide..."

It was a miracle that they had gotten so far from the car without a single light guiding them, Horst tried to think optimistically. But if the throngs they saw swarming around the mountain searched the woods carefully, it would be only a matter of time before they were discovered.

They strained to find footing on a nearby tree.

Because there was no path in the mountains, one wrong move would send them sliding down the slope.

As they remained trapped, Alma began to sob.

"I'm sorry... This is all my fault..."

"I told you not to apologize, Alma."

Horst did not care if he was just doing this for self-satisfaction. He refused to let himself blame Alma.

Driven to the brink of hopelessness, Horst took out his cell phone to see if he could find another way out. But the screen only told him that he was out of the service area.

"Shit... can't use the phone, huh..."

He ground his teeth.

At that point, his cell phone began to vibrate as it played a ringtone he had never assigned to any function.

This was the moment of truth.

The nights of humans and Others, normally never to cross, collided.

†

The mysterious group of pursuers surrounded and closed off the mountain.

The masses of lights that were chasing down Horst's car slowly came to a stop.

"...This presence..."

"I can sense them."

"They're coming."

"They're here."

"There's no mistaking it."

"...Vampires."

"And many of them."

Sensing the change in the air, the faceless figures began to whisper.

As tension overcame the woods, the figures smiled twisted grins under their masks and whispered,

"...Things are going even better than planned."

†

Horst hesitantly took the call. But before he could even put his ear on the receiver, a cacophonic voice began buzzing from the phone.

<Hey there! You two doin' alright? If you're still there, you're in luck! Whoa, lemme introduce myself. The name's QAWSED, also known as Hackey, if you wanna call me that.>

"Wh-who're you?!"

Spinning on Horst's cell phone screen was a mascot with a mouse design.

Naturally, he had no memory of downloading such an image. He wondered if this was a virus of some sort, but was it physically possible to give up control of a cell phone just by accepting a call?

The hijacked phone began to snicker.

<Sorry for scarin' ya! But we're on your side, yanno? Wipe those tears and lift up those chins! You're about to get some badass helpers over there. The answer? After the break. You can check it on our website after that, folks!>

"..."

"..."

The voice on the cell phone spoke without an ounce of caution. It was like watching a suspense film where the protagonist was being cornered, alongside a radio program where a DJ nonchalantly read out the contents of a letter.

As the tension around them crumbled, Alma and Horst went silent.

But the quiet was soon broken by two voices approaching from either side.

"Hey, this brings back memories. I remember running off just like this."

"Like a cycle of karma. Now we're the ones doing the rescuing."

Horst and Alma flinched. Two figures seemed to materialize out of thin air next to them.

The men were of different ethnicities; one caucasian and the other East Asian. But their physical features were so similar—with the exception of the colors of their eyes and hair—that they could probably pass for twins.

"Wh-who are—"

The men were both showing their faces, which meant they were not part of the group that was chasing Horst and Alma.

The Asian man calmly turned to the confused Horst.

"I apologize for scaring you. We were having a bit of a difficult time tracking you by your cell phone signal. We'll explain the details later, but I'd like to make it clear that we are on your side, and that we intend you no harm."

"Enough of the chit-chat. We're takin' you by force, whether you believe us or not."

"Yellow! Do *not* alarm them!"

"Sure, sure."

The strange duo bantered as though Horst and Alma's shock meant little to them.

Horst tried to ask the men once more who they were. But at that point,

"Whoa?!"

"Eek!"

Before they could resist, Horst and Alma were each hoisted by one of the two men and carried up the mountain.

They were being carried by humans, Horst thought in the darkness, but something about the sensation of the movement was different.

It felt like riding on a convertible. He could feel gravity pulling at his body and impacts and sounds that came at regular intervals.

He squinted open his eyes and saw the trees around him flowing past rapidly.

'Impossible... These people can't be human!'

Cold sweat ran down his face.

But the wind quickly swept away the droplets.

†

Very soon, the 'creatures' carrying Horst and Alma slowed down.

"Wh-where are we...?"

When he finally came to his senses, Horst found himself at a rest area about halfway up the mountain. Because the mountain was relatively small and covered in trees, a facility was built there for hikers and visitors to enjoy the environment.

Horst and Alma both stared blankly.

The moment they were set on the ground again, they noticed more shadowed figures around them and shrank back.

But to their surprise, they were approached by a relieved German boy.

"Thank goodness you're both all right! We were getting pretty worried... whoops, almost forgot—nice to meet you. My name's Michael Die—"

Suddenly, a boy in gothic-style clothing cut off Michael and offered Alma a hand.

"M-my name's Fannie! Y-you're Alma, right?"

The boy calling himself Fannie looked even more nervous than Alma. But what shocked Horst most was what the boy said immediately afterwards.

"Um, well... Michael here's human, but don't worry—I'm a vampire!"

"Ah..."

Alma also was shocked by the boy's declaration.

But unlike Horst, her look of surprise was purely that—bewilderment separate from fear or suspicion.

"So, uh... well. You're going to be okay now! I'm real sorry about the villagers, but from now on, I... I, uh... I'll..." Fannie stammered. But Alma did not listen to him finish, instead speaking up blankly.

"Are you really... vampires...?"

The answer came this time from the Asian man.

"Would this be proof enough?"

A shadow curled over the man's left hand, and like a mirage a bat emerged from the shadow. It began to flutter around Alma and Horst.

"A-Alma!"

Having determined that the people around them were clearly monsters, Horst got up to protect Alma.

But when he saw the look on her face, he stopped.

The shock had gone now, giving way to tears.

They were not tears of fear or resentment, but relief and joy.

Horst could do little but stand in stunned silence.

"Alma... were you really a vampire...?"

"Nah." Answered the boy Fannie introduced as a human. "So, uh. They said that Alma's 100% human. But..."

The boy named Michael paused for a moment and continued hesitantly.

"But she was the only one in that village who wasn't a vampire."



Some time earlier.

Doubs smiled merrily in the middle of the dining hall and nonchalantly laid out the facts.

"Yes! The village was, in fact, a settlement of vampires. Though the residents were immune to sunlight and running water, their only powers consisted of superhuman strength and abilities connected to the act of sucking blood."

The commotion in the dining hall reached its zenith.

As each voice was swallowed up in the flood of murmurs, Gerhardt spoke up, immune to the overpowering noise.

[Ah, it is a surprise to hear that such a settlement existed in Germany, but it does not seem quite so far-fetched. But that begs the question; why in the world did the villagers disappear without a trace?]

"The answer to that is simple. Although it is an unusually unfortunate conclusion."

Doubs shook his head ruefully, although he did not at all sound mournful.

He paused. Then, he lowered his voice.

"They were hunted by humans."

[There were dozens of vampires in that village, were there not?]

"It's not necessarily impossible. After all, the Hunters were a group of Eaters."

At the mention of the word 'Eaters', the commotion in the dining hall was silenced.

"A group of Eaters?" Melhilm broke the silence, getting to his feet with a frown.

"Aha. Once burned, twice shy. I suppose someone who has been eaten in the past would be somewhat sensitive to the topic."

"Damn you..." Melhilm growled.

But his bloodlust was quickly calmed by the pool of blood sloshing in the air.

[Patience, Melhilm. And Doubs—I advise that you avoid needless provocation.]

"Hmph."

"Please excuse me."

Bringing the meeting back on track, Gerhardt turned to Doubs.

[Now... what of the lone survivor?]

"A girl from the only human family in the village, whose parents were killed in an avalanche... or something to that effect. Although all I had to go on for this information were official records."

[...So she only survived because she was human.]

"That is the answer! On the night of the macabre massacre, the vampires were murdered by Eaters one after another, naturally turning to ash and leaving not a drop of blood behind. After all, Eaters are capable of sensing vampires. Is this not the most connivingly convenient setup?"

With a bitter chuckle, the Iridescent Extra revealed the truth behind the incident.

Every emotion flashed past his face—joyfully, ruefully, like the shimmering iridescence of his clothing.

"And so, the human girl was spared. But once the Eaters caught wind of her survival, they began to fear that she had seen their faces. They wanted to be rid of her. After all, most Eaters have official records, and a run-in with the police can destroy their lives forever. And that, my friends, is the case in a nutshell."

†

Time passed.

Michael and the others had gathered at the rest area to protect Alma.

Fannie shook Alma's limp hand up and down, looking very downcast.

"I'd really like to get you out of here myself, but if I'm with you, the Eaters are going to sense my presence. So you have to go with those humans over there."

Fannie turned. Michael was smiling obliviously, and further back was a sickly-looking young man leaning against a tree.

"What do you mean...?"

"I'll explain later. Right now, you have to get out of here."

"Hey, wait—"

Not knowing what to do, Horst turned to the relatively approachable Asian man.

And as though having expected such a question, the man answered,

"I understand that you are suspicious of us, and that this is a difficult situation to accept. But at the moment, we must prioritize the safety of the young lady. And to add, Michael here is an absolutely trustworthy human being."

The Asian man then looked down at the masses of light further down the mountain.

"If you'll excuse us, we have work to do."

†

East of the woods, at the Mars family country house.

The disturbance was contagious.

Just as Alma and Horst were being chased by mysterious pursuers, darkness was beginning to draw over Dorothy and Ferret as they prepared to go after Michael.

Or perhaps the darkness was being cast over the mansion itself, where the Organization was gathered.

"..."

"What... is that?"

Dorothy and Ferret had left the front gates by car on their way to find Michael.

But not far down the one-lane road, they found a large trailer sitting across the path.

There was no sign of a traffic accident—the trailer was there for the sole purpose of blocking the way.

Dorothy chuckled bitterly and turned to Ferret.

"Before I apologize, I need to ask you; how is your physical strength?"

"It is adequate."

"Then I'll just apologize for this—"

Before Dorothy could finish, countless figures emerged from the shadow of the trailer. Dorothy's car was engulfed in light.

"It looks like even you've gotten involved now. I'm sorry, Ferret."

"There is no need to apologize. I am here of my own accord."

There seemed to be powerful spotlights set up on top of the trailer and the road.

Dorothy stopped the car. She slowly opened the door and stepped onto the pavement.

Ferret followed her out and whispered,

"...Myself aside, I fear for Michael's safety."

"Yes... I think he'll be all right if he's with an officer, but..."

One or two dozen was too small a number to describe the group before them.

Through the blinding light, they could see humans stepping off the trailer one after another.

Although Dorothy and Ferret had no way of knowing, these people were different from the ones pursuing Alma in that they were dressed almost uniformly.

The people wore black balaclavas and helmets. Their black jackets were designed in a military style, lending them the look of a special force.

But they were not armed with assault rifles or shotguns, like soldiers were. All they had were objects reminiscent of grenades hanging from their belts, and short knives. From the unnecessarily ornate designs of the blades, Dorothy deduced that they must be made of silver.

"If you're worried about Michael, you should go on ahead."

"...?"

Ferret indeed wanted to go. But she could not leave Dorothy. And how was she to find Michael, when she had no lead?

"Maybe the power of love will guide you to him?"

"...I cannot believe how calm you can be in a situation like this." Ferret said sullenly. Dorothy chuckled and handed her something.

"I'm just joking. Here."

It was a white cell phone. On it was a sticker of a photograph Dorothy had taken somewhere with Gerhardt. It almost looked like a ghost sighting featuring a beautiful woman in white, but Ferret decided to not point that out.

"I'll contact you later, so head east for now. Michael should be somewhere between this manor and the closest city to the east."

"But we must first do something about these people—"

"Don't worry, Ferret. It looks like your ride is here."

"Pardon?"

There was an impact.

Ferret turned to the source of the sound. Two motorcycles had appeared next to her out of nowhere.

The people by the trailer froze, cautiously observing the scene.

But the moment Ferret realized who the newcomers were, she was simultaneously shocked, perplexed, and relieved.

"It's you!"

Riding the motorcycles were a blue-haired man and his bald friend.

They were werewolves from Growerth, whom Ferret met often and could trust.

"C'mon, Miss Ferret! Let's get going!"

"Sorry you're gonna have to ride behind someone you're not even dating."

The werewolves joked, turning around and revving the engines.

Dorothy gave the confused Ferret a gentle push.

"Go on."

"But what about—"

"Don't worry. We're used to situations like this."

Ferret bit her lip.

"...Thank you. Let us meet again soon."

"Of course. See you soon, Ferret."

With that, Ferret climbed onto the seat behind the blue-haired werewolf. But—

"I shall not let you escape."

All of a sudden, a dignified voice broke the silence veiling the people in uniform.

From the quality of the tone, the voice seemed to belong to the leader of the group. But his form was hidden in the bright lights.

The werewolves, however, paid the voice no mind as they started their motorcycles.

'Now that I think about it... how did they get here on these motorcycles? There is a trailer parked across the road, and that sound from earlier...'

Seeing familiar faces had relaxed Ferret enough to finally wonder about the logistics of their reunion.

But her question was soon answered.

"Hold on tight!"

The blue-haired werewolf began to drive, and immediately raised one leg.

And with his hands still on the handlebars, he kicked off the ground on one side with both his feet.

There was an explosive noise.

It was as though the ground itself had exploded beneath them. A moment later, the werewolf's feet were again on either side of the chassis.

One thing, however, was different.

The motorcycle was high in the air.

It flew in an arc over the trailer, further and further into the sky.

Yet Ferret did not so much as scream.

She was not even shocked at the superhuman feat.

Because every thread of her emotion had been gathered into one mass, only to be undone when she was finally reunited with her foolish childhood friend.

†

"Hmph... They got away."

The voice did not sound particularly disappointed about having lost the motorcycles.

Dorothy's eyes, finally adjusting to the lights, caught sight of the man at the center of the commotion.

The man was pale and looked to be in his early thirties. He was wearing a black suit, and his black hair was slicked back and fixed in place.

Although there was a sharp glint in his eyes, there was no life in the rest of his body. He looked like a living corpse.

'A vampire.'

Someone who had no idea what vampires were truly like would identify a man like him as a vampire.

Unfortunately, the man's physique did not quite live up to the force behind his voice. Unless he was a comedian or an actor from a horror movie, the fact of his being a vampire was all that was clear about him.

"This is a rather distinguished guest we have here today. Should I introduce myself?"

"No need for that. I have no intention of revealing my name to a lowly wench like you." The man said pompously, cutting the conversation short.

"Then I suppose I'll be saving my breath."

'This man is probably a vampire.'

'But... if what I heard earlier is true, these people around him are Eaters.'

'I might get killed if I'm not careful.'

As Dorothy quietly let out a bitter chuckle, a laid-back voice joined the scene as though cutting through the tension in the air.

"Excuse me? What business do you have with my mansion?"

It was Romy Mars, the owner of the country house.

Next to her was Rude Gardastance. Gold and Silver, standing side by side.

"Oh? Miss Dorothy! You're here! Thank goodness. We were so worried you'd get caught up on your way here." Romy said cheerfully.

The vampire who seemed to be the leader of the Eaters cleared his throat.

"Well, if it isn't the head of the former Mars Clan."

"Would you happen to be a member of another Clan?"

"Yes. Of course, I have no intention of identifying myself to a plebeian former human being who only took control of the family after the rest of her Clan perished."

The man was clearly looking down on Romy and the others. Gardastance, who had been smoking a cigar, cracked his neck and joined the conversation.

"I finally understand. The mastermind behind this incident is a Clan that plots to drive us to oblivion."

It was a keyword that had been repeated many times over the course of the conference.

For vampires who valued blood ties above all else, the rise to power of the Organization—a nameless group of vampires—was nothing short of unwanted. It was quite understandable, as Clans ostracized any vampires with no blood relation to its members.

The man who lived up to the rumors of the prideful Clans responded to Gardastance.

"'Mastermind'? Not quite. I gave no orders regarding the village. Although it is true that the attack was carried out by Eaters under my influence..."

With an eerie smile on his pale face, the man continued plainly.

"...These Eaters make a living off of hunting vampires."

The officers were not particularly shocked. After all, they had both heard the rumors and watched Doubs' presentation earlier.

There were many humans who secretly made a career of hunting vampires. And it was not uncommon for such humans to be working for vampires. Many hired Hunters to expand their territory, out of a sense of justice or for the sole reason that they saw all other vampires as nuisances in their plans to extend their influence into human society, as the Clans did.

But what surprised the officers most was what came afterwards.

"The ones who hired these Eaters... were the humans who live in the city at the foot of the mountain."

"..."

"There must have been a rumor floating around about them. Even our exalted family had never heard of vampires with official records living alongside humans. Everything began when these foolish Eaters came crying to us about the commotion they ended up causing in the human world."

"I think you mean that was when your luck finally ran out." Gardastance replied, his pride a match for the pale man's pomp. "It all makes sense. As soon as you heard that the Eaters under your influence wiped out a village of vampires, you conspired to use that fact alongside the mass murderer incident from ten years ago to cast suspicion on us. I'm lost for words. I suppose we could flay you alive and sell your thick skin as a winter coat for a decent price. Personally, I would buy it for three dollars and toss it out before I tried it on." He said with a puff of his cigar.

"Silence, you uncultured wretch!" The pale vampire cried. "You mere vampires should never have even existed in this world! And I cannot stand for your having more influence in the human world than us!"

Rude, however, remained completely calm as he fixed his cigar.

"Unbelievable. You're beginning to sound like a textbook example of an extra from an action movie. If you wish to be treated like an exalted being, I suggest you try and refine yourself further. As a vampire, you don't live up to an ounce of the dignity of Christopher Lee."

"What are you babbling about?!"

"Hm? You've never heard of Christopher Lee. Incredible. And you still have the nerve to call yourself a Clan member? You couldn't possibly be the head of a Clan, but you'd best keep your ignorance a secret from the rest of your brethren! And to add, I sincerely hope that you have at least heard of the noble Sir Baskerville. If not... you may very well be cast out from your kin!"

"What...?! Urgh...!"

Dorothy felt a twinge of pity for the flabbergasted vampire.

Christopher Lee was the actor who played Count Dracula in a film, and Sir Baskerville was a character played by Christopher Lee in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

It was amusing to watch the man flail in confusion, Dorothy thought. Vampires from Clans tended to avoid contact with human culture, so such a reaction was natural.

'Really... I think Gerhardt might be the only one who could match Rude for bluffing.'

As tension drained from the air, Dorothy lightly leapt back and stood behind Romy.

When she looked, she spotted other vampires from the mansion poking out their heads to take a look at the scene. About seven or eight Colors were also among them.

"Hah. Uncultured rabble, the lot of you." Said the pale man, trying to hide his humiliation. "You're all already within my grasp. Try and act calm while you still can."

"I could say the same for your attitude as well." Rude said, as calm as ever.

"Pfft... Ahahahaha! How can you be confident with such puny numbers?!" The pale man chortled, dignity draining from his tone.

"Our true enemy today is not you, or these Eaters you've brought along. It's the humans."

"...What?"

"Those simple humans who know absolutely nothing about the reality hidden underneath. How their fears give rise to a twisted sense of justice that justifies their actions. How something so trivial as fear allows them to scapegoat an innocent girl. How their good intention to protect the peace brings about a malicious end where they hunt down a girl who may or may not be a vampire. That is the enemy we must face. Not a petty buffoon like you."

"...'Petty buffoon'...?"

The pale vampire's voice dropped an octave as he ground his teeth—

And laughed.

The man's lips cracked open to a humanly impossible degree as he laughed and laughed and laughed.

Like a cheater bursting into uncontrollable laughter as he emerged victorious with a hand he had set up earlier, but with even greater intensity as the sound filled the woods.

"HAH HAHAHA! Foolish dogs... bark while you still can!"

"From the sound of the barking, you're the only dog I hear around here." Gardastance pointed out, but the man ignored him.

"The Eaters you see here will be more than enough to destroy you all, but I'm a careful man! If you're out to exterminate vermin, why not go all the way and pick them off one by one like you're picking out *lice*?"

With that, the man raised his hands on high.

At that moment,

A starry sky began to spread all around them.

Lights. Lights. Lights.

Easily a hundred strong, the lights came on in the woods and surrounded the vast Mars country house with sheer numbers.

Each and every one was carrying a weapon of some sort. They were dressed more or less the same as the Eaters around the trailer. The lights were coming from the helmets they wore on their heads, each pointed at the officers by the manor gates.

"Ahahaha! What do you think? I understand that you *rabble* also keep Eaters for yourselves, but *this* is beyond anything you could ever dream of!" The man cried arrogantly. Gardastance sighed, astonished.

"It certainly is a large group you command. It will be all the more humiliating for you if your plan ends in failure."

"Don't take me for a fool. I've already dispersed your numbers, just as I planned. According to the reports, there is but a fraction of your full number at this manor. And perhaps you've been given a report that claimed that there were twenty or thirty Eaters at most at my disposal?"

The man rambled at unnecessary lengths in a bid to lord over his foes and throw them into despair.

Allowing his twisted sadism to take over, the Clan member snapped his fingers.

"Heh heh heh..."

A familiar chuckle arose from among the officers.

With the almost-malicious snicker, a man stepped forward from the Organization members.

A man wearing an iridescent suit and a distinctive hat.

"Doubts?" Dorothy asked suspiciously. But the Iridescent Extra ignored her and stepped over to the Clan member without a care.

Stopping several steps before the man, Doubts greeted him with an elegant bow.

"Well, if it isn't Master Levillio. Your concern for my well-being humbles me to no end, sir."

Then, Doubts turned and bowed again.

"Heh heh heh... Don't think too badly of me, everyone. Now I can finally be considered a part of a Clan, however lowly of a position it may be."

"Hah! How does it feel, being betrayed by one of your own?"

Betrayal.

It was a fatal flaw in the Organization's system, one now exposed for all to see.

Fully convinced that his attempt at forcing his foes to despair was successful, the master of the Eaters cried out jovially.

"Fooled by this man's misinformation, you sent most of your officers to the east side of the forest! I did indeed send Eaters in that direction, but our true goal has always been a particular officer who should have remained here! Romy Mars!"

"What?! Me?!" Romy cried, her wings flapping in bewilderment.

"What are those wings on your back...? In any case! You are indeed a former cornerstone of a Clan! After all, over ten thousand vampires—weak and powerless as they are—flock to you and serve you as their leader!"

"Wha...?"

Romy was shocked. When in the world had she become a leader of any sort?

That was Levillio's only chance.

He should have realized a crucial fact.

That the officers standing in a row before him were not even close to the abyss of despair.

"No need to play dumb! After all, who else could head such a violent and chaotic *rabble* of nobodies?!"

"Indeed, Miss Romy Mars! It's incredibly inelegant of you to dubiously deny your involvement!" Doubs joined in.

Romy frowned in confusion.

"After everything you did, assigning me the terribly troublesome role of a *mole*!"

"Oh!"

Romy finally remembered, clapping her hands together.

"Yes, you're right! I *am* the leader! That's right. I was in charge of your pay, wasn't I, Mr. Doubs?"

"...?"

Levillio was confused by Romy's reaction, but he quickly decided that she was a fool spouting nonsense.

"Hah. Caught in a trap set by your own mole? What goes around comes around! Hahahaha! Now, it's time to wrap up this story. Doubs. Have you any final words for your former comrades?"

"I wonder..." The iridescent man fixed his hat and thought for a moment, then broke out into a snide grin.

"How about a bet, everyone? Will you be able to defeat all of these Eaters here—over two hundred of them? The stakes are, of course, your lives and mine!"

"Hahaha! You're quite the cruel one yourself, Doubs. I'll join in! If you can defeat every Eater I've brought with me, I'll gladly surrender my life!"

The Eaters began to snicker alongside Levillio.

They laughed and laughed and laughed.

Wearing smiles convinced of their superiority.

But,

"Then if you believe yourselves capable of deftly defeating these Eaters, please! Proudly put up your hands!"

At Doubs' call, every officer raised a hand.

Including Doubs himself.

"...?"

"I would also like to bet on the Organization's victory."

"What is the meaning of this, Doubs Hewley." Levillio growled. Doubs chuckled.

"I only mean that, once this battle is over, I will hand my very life to you, Master Levillio. A ritual of loyalty, if you will."

Although it obviously sounded like Doubs was only flattering him, Levillio was so convinced of his superiority that he did not doubt him.

"Of course! Now I understand. Hah! Ahahaha! Excellent! I shall personally petition our family head and have you accepted as our jester!"

"A heavenly honor, sir." Doubs bowed deeply.

No one could tell what kind of face he wore, shadowed under the brim of his hat.

Of course, with the exception of the Colors who had known him for many years.

"Now, let us begin! I have no time to listen to your final words! Try and fit them into your death throes!"

When Levillio raised his hands, over one hundred Eaters at his beck and call erased the laughter from their faces. Unchaining the bloodlust within, simultaneously they leapt off the ground—

"Castlevania."

At that moment, the Eaters noticed something about Romy Mars, the girl whom they had been instructed to target first.

She was mumbling something—a word—and at that point, there was a sword in her hands.

They also noticed that the sky was glinting silver.

The east side of the forest, near the city.

The city was visible between the trees from the mountain slope.

But between the vantage point and the city was a barrier.

Eaters carrying lanterns.

They were Hunters who ate the flesh and blood of vampires, mixed the leftover ashes with blood to drink them, and broke anything that turned into ash and stuffed them into their mouths. Through that act of feasting, they would remain human yet gain the physical strengths of vampires.

Eaters were the natural enemy of many vampires; killers to be avoided at all costs.

Such beings had come together to form a group, and were spread out through the forest between the mountain and the city.

From a distance, the lights flickered and swam as though trying to frighten the very mountains.

"...It looks like things are working out on that end as well."

Several men, presumably the leaders of this group, were having a conversation beside a trailer parked to block off one of the mountain roads.

"Then it looks like we'll have to begin our hunt."

"What about the survivor and her guardian?"

"Kill the man. Make it look like a vampire did it. And we're to take the girl back to the 'fortress'. Alive, if possible."

"Jesus Christ. Our boss's got one hell of a hobby."

The men joked and laughed.

They smiled, convinced of their safety.

There was no fear in the air around them.

"Anyway. This is what those people from the city are going to agree to—the girl was a vampire, and the man was killed by her. Doesn't matter to us either way, and whatever we do, it looks like they were *convinced* the girl was a vampire to begin with."

"You know what? Humans are scarier than vampires."

The men stood leaning against the trailer as they watched the lights climb higher up the mountain.

They were Eaters who had eaten vampires in the past.

Those around them were the same. Eaters who had long surpassed the realm of humanity. And since they did not have the kind of regulations a formal army did, they naturally allowed themselves to let down their guard.

"I sense more of them."

Just as they also reached for their weapons,

The Eaters noticed something and looked up at the mountain once more.

"What...?"

Though they could sense vampires, they did not have the ability to sense the presence of other Eaters.

That was why they were carrying lanterns to identify their locations.

But the lights twinkling in the woods had grown fewer.

"...?"

On a closer look, they realized that they had not 'grown' fewer.

The lights were *continuing* to disappear from the mountain, one after another.

"Hey... what's going on here?"

"Someone run into trouble?"

Although the Organization's officers were the cream of the crop, they were still failures and stragglers who were cast out by the Clans.

At least, that was what their superiors had told them.

Then how were they to explain the darkness spreading before their eyes?

By the time they realized the disturbance, it was too late.

The darkness ran down the mountain as though tearing through the carpet of lights, cascading directly toward the men at the trailer.

"It's coming."

But the Eaters refused to panic, preparing for battle.

Their foes were probably intending to ambush them from the darkness. But such tactics were useless in the middle of the road, where everything was exposed for the Eaters to see. The men were also certain that the dozens of Eaters in their group would be enough to fight off any adversary that came their way.

But composure soon drained from their expressions as they braced themselves for the enemy rushing from the shadows.

Darkness was coming.

It was near.

Darkness fell like an avalanche. Something was about to emerge.

They were prepared. But they were afraid.

What kind of monster would emerge from the darkness?

The shadows fueled their fearful imagination, deepening their terror.

They would soon know.

That what emerged from the darkness, rending the lights,

Was darkness itself.

†

"I'll protect you, Alma.

"Once you grow up and become an adult, I want you to make a decision.

"Will you live as a human, or will you become a vampire?

"But whether you stay human, or whether you become one of us...

"I love you so much, Alma."

The girl should have been happy.

It was a secret she could not reveal to those outside the village.

The fact that they shared the secret with her was the link that bound her to them.

She had no fears about becoming a vampire.

Once she became an adult, and the boy she loved so much stopped aging—

Then she would ask him to turn her.

So that she could live peacefully in the village forever.

Ever since she was young, the girl dreamed of such a future.

Not fully understanding the meanings behind eternity, both good and bad, she innocently continued to harbor a wish.

But her wish was so simply shattered.

Before she even understood what it meant to live forever,
A tempest of violence swept through the village.

"You have to hide here, Alma. Don't come outside.

"Those people are here to kill us vampires."

"Why? What did you do to deserve any of that?!"

"They're trying to kill us because we're vampires.

"I think they can sense where we are.

"But you're human, so they won't find you. So you have to stay hidden in here, okay?"

"No! I don't want that! I want to—"

The girl pleaded with the boy.

She begged him to make her a vampire.

She clung to him as he refused.

She was tired of being alone. She was sick of it.

So she would become a vampire and die with the boy.

That was all she wanted.

Then, the boy smiled kindly and gently bit down into her neck.

But he did not turn the girl.

Though he had the power to turn her, he chose to let her live on as a human being.

Not knowing that, the girl fell unconscious at the sudden loss of blood. And just before she blacked out, she heard him say,

"Goodbye."

That was the story of the girl and the vampires.

Afterwards, she was found by the human postman. Just as the boy wished, she had to live on as a human.

But the humans would not allow even that.

It was not that an individual rejected her existence.

The wills of countless individuals, coalesced into one great body known as the city—

The fear welling up within that body was what tried to destroy the girl's happiness.

†

In the woods.

"At the hospital... and at the police station... everyone was talking about it." Alma confessed as they walked through the forest.

She was not talking to Michael or Rudi, who was leading their party, but to Horst, who was holding her hand.

"They said that... that vampires attacked the village... that the villagers were killed by vampires..."

"Alma..."

"I wanted to tell them that they were wrong! That the villagers were the vampires, and that they didn't do anything wrong! They were killed just because they were vampires! But... even if I told them, no one would have believed me. No one ever said that vampires could be good... So... that's why I-I couldn't... I couldn't tell anyone..."

Alma stammered, perhaps trying to choke back sobs. Horst made up his mind to believe in her.

To be perfectly frank, it would be a lie to say that he was not confused.

If he hadn't seen what he saw just earlier, he would never have believed.

But as the confusion began to settle, Horst began to understand.

Why Alma had looked so sad when they left the police station, and when they were at the motel.

When he—the human she was closest to—openly deemed that vampires were evil, she took it to mean that his opinion spoke for the stance of all humanity.

It was true that many humans considered vampires evil.

It was precisely because she understood that fact that Alma had no choice but to lock up the secret within her heart.

'I'm a goddamned idiot.

'Acting like some kind of knight in shining armor, when I didn't know a thing about Alma to begin with!'

Horst's mistaken impression was an understandable one, and by normal standards, perhaps he was correct about vampires to begin with. But his misfortune was in the fact that the incident went far beyond the boundaries of normalcy.

At that point, the young man who stepped past that boundary said without looking back,

"...You're better off forgetting. About that village, and the vampire you loved."

"What...?"

"Those memories are going to torment you one day."

Horst frowned. Alma looked back and forth between Rudi and Horst, not knowing what to do.

Rudi was accompanying them as their bodyguard.

He had been chosen because Eaters could not sense other Eaters, and because of his combat skills. Though the Organization had other available Eaters, the broken Rudi had probably been selected for the mission because of Doubs' meddling.

The Iridescent Extra was a man who reveled in such cruelty.

Because Rudi knew that well, he was not particularly distraught about his assignment. He merely carried out his mission with utter calm.

His body was still breaking.

His strength was now less than half of what it was when he went to Growerth half a year ago.

Yet he was still leagues above Eaters who had eaten one or two vampires at most. Acting as the advance guard, he approached the lights in the woods, knocked out the Eaters in the shadows, and took away their lanterns.

As Rudi repeated the process, Alma and Horst had come to see him as the most dependable member of their party.

That was precisely why his advice to Alma came as such a shock.

Not even looking at the surprised Alma, Rudi continued quietly.

He cried out in a whisper, so his voice would not ring out overhead.

"Vampires and humans just happen to look the same and use the same language! That's all!"

"..."

"There's no way they could truly understand one another! Vampires... they can't... they could never... Damn it!"

Frustrated at himself for venting so, Rudi turned to Alma.

Though she was holding back tears, she defiantly met his gaze.

'I believe in the people from our village.'

'No matter what anyone says, I'll never stop believing in them.'

Although she said nothing, her eyes spoke for her determination.

Rudi was about to respond—

But at that moment, he was interrupted by a voice coming from Horst's cell phone.

<That's enough, Rudi.>

It was a metallic, artificial voice.

The voice of the officer Hackey Mouse.

Although his name was QAWSED, the officers generally just called him 'Hackey'. He was a vampire whose soul was fused with the digital plane. It was rumored that he was in a conflict with a similar being somewhere in Japan over the digital plane, and not even Rudi had seen his physical form. Hackey always attended conferences through computers.

"...Mr. QAWSED. This has nothing to do with you."

<You've got some nerve, eh? You obey Melhilm, Caldimir, and Garde like a dog, but you're pretty damned cold to ev'ryone else! That ain't good. You gotta learn to be *social*! Expand your horizons!> Hackey said affectionately. Rudi did not want to listen.

<'Sides, you shouldn't pick fights with a little girl over something like that. You're being one hell of an *insult* to your sister. Hm... her name was Elsa or something, right?>

"...!"

The moment Hackey mentioned Elsa's name, Rudi froze.

"...What does my sister have to do with any of this."

<I'd have been a-okay stayin' quiet, yanno? But Doubs put me in charge of all his bugs, so I heard it all from everywhere. 'Bout your sister.>

The word 'bugs' should normally have been a point of provocation. But no one pointed that out.

"What the hell do you know about her...?"

<Don'cha wanna know *why* she forgave Theo?>

"...!"

The question was a wild card.

Elsa.

She was Rudi's sister, taken away by the mass murderer Theodosius M. Waldstein.

She was the one who supported Theo after he regained his sanity.

She was, ultimately, turned to ashes by Rudi's childhood friend. Now, only her bones remained as the vessel for a soul that was, or perhaps not, hers.

"..."

Rudi almost stopped. But his sense of reason won out over his emotions, keeping him focused on his mission. He continued to walk in silence.

In other words, he wanted to hear more.

<All righto. Lemme tell you. 'Bout your sister's secrets. That last secret Theo held back from you, even after acting like he spilled it all.>

Rudi broke his silence with a self-deprecating laugh.

"...You mean... Theo is still hiding something?"

<You betcha. He was just 'bout ready to take this one to the grave. You still wanna hear? ... To tell ya the truth, I haven't even given this info to Doubs yet. I wasn't gonna say a word, no sir. But you were just being damned awful to Alma here. You left me no choice, yanno? But if you just apologize to her...>

"Never mind. Tell me."

His anxiety surfacing, Rudi rushed Hackey and mumbled to himself masochistically.

"It's not like I could fall any further."

<All righto. Don't say I didn't warn ya. You're gonna regret this one.>

†

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The laboratory.

"So you really want to know?" Theo asked, half-defeated.

Professor gently tilted her coffin forward, her voice more serious than it ever was.

<I'm not going to try and become more like Elsa, or try and act like her.>

The vampire who was a match for the viscount's otherworldliness twisted her arms around and looked straight at Doctor, at that moment more human than anyone else.

<I... I just want to know more about you, Doctor. And about the girl who saved you and loved you. ...Heh heh. It almost sounds like I'm a clingy girl asking her boyfriend about his ex-girlfriend.>

Although Professor sounded embarrassed, her painfully raw emotions carried through to Theo.

And so, the chains of guilt grew heavier and tighter around his heart.

But Doctor endured it. He put on a gentle smile and slowly began.

"I'll tell you everything. About me and Elsa. But before that, I just want to tell you... Thank you... for listening."

†

The past. Somewhere in Germany.

I killed—

I killed killed—

I killed. I killed. I killed.

I killed killed killed killed killed killed killed killed killed.

Killed killed killed killed killed killed killed killed killed killed so I killed killed killed—

'Because I'm a vampire.

'Because. I'm a vampire.

'Kill. Kill. Kill kill kill.

'I am a vampire.

'Yes. I am a vampire.

'So please no one abandon me.'

A clump of the mass of vampires that had taken root inside him.

The boy's sanity was trapped inside that monstrous clump.

'A vampire must not be found by humans.

'A vampire must remain in the darkness.

'But I am a vampire. I need—

'Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood.'

'This isn't me.'

'It is.'

'It's not! This can't be me!'

'But I am a vampire and I need blood blood blood blood kill kill kill kill—'

Though his psyche was lost to senseless madness, the only thing that rose to the surface was an innocent, childlike smile. The only words that escaped his lips was a gentle and intelligible question.

"Do you want to be friends?"

So simply the words came to him.

But there was no sanity behind them.

All he did as a vampire was trick people, betray them, kill them, and drink their blood.

In him dwelled a combination of countless vampires' souls. That system of betrayal was all that settled in his brain.

Like a hunter instinctively chasing his prey.

Not of his own will, but like an insect born naturally with the ability.

Though there was no reason in him, a combination of symbols was all it took to turn the vampire into a vampire.

But as the system finally took root, something changed.

The completion of a system meant that madness was no longer necessary.

On occasion, sanity returned to the boy.

It was not a cycle of sleep and waking, or that of multiple personalities. It was as though he could begin to vaguely observe the world around him. As though he was dissolving with the world itself.

The world was out of focus. His heart did not even try to clarify the images, meaninglessly tilting the lens in every direction.

On that day too, he was watching the unfocused world beyond the lens.

Rudi and Theresia.

He became friends with two people with those names.

He would kill the villagers.

He would betray them, suck their blood, and throw them into despair.

But he felt nothing.

Though his consciousness was nearly clear, it registered that he was taking action, without feeling a thing.

It was as though his body had been taken over by another and his emotions killed by medication as he watched everything from afar.

If he were to be completely honest, Theo would confess that his hazy memories had begun to resurface, a little while before he met the two children.

But at that particular time, he was truly watching himself move from afar, not even understanding what he was doing.

Rudi and Theresia would soon become sacrifices.

Without so much as a shred of pity for them,

Theo silently watched his body move on its own.

But that soon came to an end.

He must have felt something. His subconscious slowly came into focus.

It felt as though he had heard a voice.

Rudi was talking to someone on the phone.

The tiny voice he heard from the telephone had made his world clear, if only by a small amount.

Then, the moment of fate.

For Theo,

For Rudi,

For Theresia,

For the countless victims,

For Elsa.

The moment Rudi brought Theo into town and invited him home—

Everything grew clear.

Into focus.

Though his emotions had not returned, his vision and consciousness was sharp.

He fully understood every word that left his mouth.

The memories from that point onward were quite clear to Theo, different from the hazy images of the past.

But at that point, his emotions and control over his body had not returned.

The twisted souls of countless vampires moved his body through the front door of a certain home.

He walked through the hallway, and into a room where a meal was waiting for him.

When he turned the corner, the image of the room came into sight.

And there, the boy found Elsa.

†

Underground, Waldstein Castle. The laboratory.

"There was something I left out when I first told you about my past."

<Um...>

She must have had a hunch.

There was a hint of hesitation in Professor's voice.

She wondered if she was really allowed to know such a thing.

But she had to listen.

No matter what happened to her from that point onwards, she felt a sense of responsibility to listen.

Taking Professor's silence as determination, Theo remembered the face of a certain girl.

"...I never told you the name of the vampire girl I met on Growerth, did I?"

"Her name... was Elsa."

†

A forest in southern Germany.

"...What?"

Rudi's mind refused to accept the words he heard over the phone.

"What... are you saying...?"

<I'm tellin' you that your sister was already a vampire—even before Theo bit her right in front of ya!>

"Hah. Hah."

He found himself laughing.

His emotionless mask cracked as unfeeling laughter escaped his lips.

"That's... hilarious. Hey... did you hear that? He says my sister was a vampire. From the beginning... Heh. Isn't this crazy?"

He turned round at Michael, Alma, and Horst with a positively childlike look.

Alma and Horst, not knowing much about Rudi, could not react. They almost felt as though, if they gave the wrong answer, Rudi would kill them where they stood.

Michael, on the other hand, knew well what all this meant to Rudi, and so could not bring himself to speak.

If the voice from the cell phone was correct, Michael could not imagine just how much the information must have rattled Rudi.

"Big Sis was *human*. Because I'm one, too. So how...? How could she possibly have been a vampire?"

<D'you remember seeing any pictures of yourself as a baby that included her? Nah, lemme put it this way. From *when* do you remember your sister being in your life?>

"..."

<Elsa, see, wanted to throw out her life as a vampire. She wanted to be human.>

<Then she finally found what she was looking for. A couple who took her in as their daughter, knowin' she was a vampire.>

†

The past. Somewhere in Germany.

Big sis

Elsa

The vampire

She's here

Someone else's family

Rudi's saying

"This is my sister Elsa!"

No

No

Elsa

No

This girl—

Big sis—

Rudi—

I see her eyes Elsa's eyes so surprised to see me

I'm nervous no it can't be

Elsa is dead murdered killed by humans that's what they said

Humans killed Elsa

Don't Stop it not those eyes

Don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me
don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me
don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me
don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me
don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me
don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me—

His emotions—

Theo's numbed emotions came rushing back like a tsunami.

But what returned first was hatred and outrage, and the desire to take back the one he saw.

If put together, perhaps the three emotions would amount to a sort of love.

But his emotions flooded back into his twisted heart at once.

The system crashed—

The cunning he used to murder discreetly disappeared—

Leaving his free body to the whims of something in his heart, Theo filled his soul with emotion.

And at that moment,

There was a bloodbath in that once-peaceful town.

He planned to kill Rudi, Theresia, and everyone who lived in that town.

"I'll spare the two of you."

He did not mean it. He had before planted false hope before breaking it.

He thought to disguise it all in a fire or a disappearance, slowly but surely cutting down the population.

He thought. He thought. He thought.

The completed 'system' of a vampire in his heart ceased to function, leaving him a simple mass murderer who flaunted his power to the townspeople.

But Rudi and Theresia—

It was Elsa who led him to leave two survivors.

She had tried to stop Theo, but the mass murderer was too powerful for her. She could not prevent his rampage.

"It's because I love you two so very much."

When Theo said this to Rudi, he was carrying Elsa in his arms.

The blood flowing from her neck meant that Theo had impulsively bitten her and sucked her blood.

He said many fanciful words, but Theo ultimately planned to kill Rudi anyway.

Elsa knew. He was not the same boy she met all those years ago.

But she was also sure that the boy was somewhere within the creature.

She had no proof or evidence. She just wanted to believe.

She slowly wrapped her arms around him and pulled herself close, placing her lips on his.

At that moment, there was a change in the boy.

'What...?'

A flicker of sanity in his heart.

'What... am I doing...?'

"So... what you tell me now is going to decide if your sister will live or die."

His mouth was forming words contrary to his thoughts.

Words to make Rudi despair.

'Rudi was my friend why am I why—'

"I'll kill her if you say you love her, and I'll kill her if you say you hate her. What are you going to do? Hah! Try and stop me if you can! Come on, try and save your sister!"

'...Aaahhhhh... r i g h t E l s a

'Elsa weren't you so glad you're alive what ? Kill her why?'

"Ahaha! It's all on you now. How does it feel, holding your precious family's life in the palm of your hand? You could even say that you've *subjugated* her, just like a vampire! Ahahaha! Hahahahahaha!"

'No this isn't me I would never say this—'

The boy's consciousness began to struggle for control over his body.

But he did not win his freedom. The remnants of the system led him to follow its rules.

The boy named Rudi said something.

He was pleading.

He was begging for his own life. Begging to be spared.

Listening to her 'little brother', Elsa slowly leaned in toward Theo—

"I... I wish... you never existed..."

At that moment, Theodosius M. Waldstein's consciousness tasted absolute despair.

The girl he loved, pined for, and sought.

The girl he thought he had lost forever.

In the moment of their reunion, the boy's very being had been rejected.

The mass murderer in Theo, born of the trigger of despair, disappeared inside him with that same trigger.

Leaving Theodosius to contend with the results of his carnage.

†

The past. The island of Growerth.

When Theodosius opened his eyes,

He saw before him a nostalgic sky full of stars.

"..."

At the same time, tears fell from his eyes.

That was all that he could do.

When he opened his eyes, Theo had returned to being that boy from the past.

Though he had the body of a vampire, his heart was again human.

And he understood everything.

Everything that had been done to him,

Everything that he had done.

He did not even have the chance to recall it all before the tears streamed down his face.

All he understood was that he had taken Elsa somewhere else before his consciousness cut off.

But that no longer mattered.

He had finally, truly lost everything.

Not even an eternity in the fires of hell would be enough to cleanse him of his sins.

It was over. It was all over.

'Why? Why was I even born?'

He found himself remembering his parents, who were both probably still alive. Tears began to well up again.

Perhaps he could go back to the past and kill himself.

If only his present self and all the tragedy he wrought had never happened.

Knowing such a thing was impossible, Theo's eyes grew teary up once more—

"...You're awake."

He felt someone sitting beside him. A familiar voice shook his eardrums.

"The viscount told me everything. About why you became a vampire."

Her voice was endlessly gentle; endlessly sad.

"The viscount was so angry that he couldn't save you. Could you imagine? The viscount, getting mad? ...Oh, right. I guess you've never met him, have you?"

'Why?'

Theo was certain that the voice belonged to Elsa. But his emotions refused to order themselves.

'Why are you here, Elsa? Are you... here to kill me?'

"El...sa..."

He no longer called her 'Big sis'.

He was no longer allowed to use those words.

"Thank goodness... It's really you, Theo."

Elsa smiled.

"You know... after I said goodbye to you, I crossed over to the mainland. And all that time... I thought that I wanted to die."

She was not blaming anyone. All she did was tell her story.

Of how she met a certain couple.

How she became a big sister.

How she made many friends as a human being.

How she spent her days, forgetting that she was a vampire.

From trivial details to turning points in her life, she recited her imperfect autobiography to Theo.

Theo, meanwhile, said nothing.

Her every word was etched into his mind and his heart. But he could not respond.

Because at that moment, he did not have the right to respond to anyone.

All he wanted was punishment.

His sins could not be forgiven.

If only the girl could take his life—if only he could soothe her heart, even a little—

But no matter how long he listened, she did not try to kill him—or even blame him.

But when she began to talk about her little brother, she finally shook.

“Whenever I looked at Rudi... I... I always thought of you, Theo.”

“...Me?”

“Isn’t it stupid? I... I abandoned you, but I...! I ended up seeing you in him... my precious little brother... that human family I wanted so much...!”

Her voice began to tremble, gripping Theo’s emotions.

She was not blaming anyone; she poured out all of her frustrations onto herself.

“Maybe... maybe I should have just been a family with you. If I’d known this would happen, it might have been better for me to just turn you! But... I couldn’t drag you into this world. I just couldn’t! Because I hate vampires... even though you love them so much, I hate vampires with all my heart...!”

She finally went quiet.

There was a moment of silence. The night breeze from the sea blew past them both.

“...I really *am* a vampire, aren’t I?”

“That’s—not true.”

Theo struggled, but managed to respond.

Although he had nothing to back up his words, he sensed despair in the girl’s voice. The same despair as his own. He wanted to reject that, if nothing else. She could not be allowed to shoulder such pain.

“If I were human... I might have killed you already. You killed the people I loved... right before my eyes... I... I lost my family... If I were human, I would have been too scared to move... But in the end, I... I was *relieved!*”

“Elsa...”

"You know? I thought that I'd finally stopped thirsting for blood! But when I looked at Rudi, I... I thought of you... And for the past little while... I'd been wanting to suck his blood! My little brother's blood! I wanted to turn him... no, not just him. Mom, Dad, and all my friends... deep down, I wanted to turn them all!"

Theo did not know what to say as Elsa berated herself.

Elsa went quiet for a moment, but she then whispered,

"That was why I was so relieved. I was glad that I didn't end up turning them myself. That Rudi, at least, survived."

'But Elsa. If you really were, you wouldn't tell me all this like you're trying to repent.' Theo almost said, but Elsa whispered first.

"But... that doesn't mean I can forgive you."

Though his heart was shaken by her declaration, Theo also felt a sense of salvation.

'That's right. I shouldn't be forgiven.'

'So... if it makes Elsa feel even a little bit better... that's enough for me.'

But the girl continued.

She would truly detach herself from Theo.

"That's why... I'm going to forgive you."

"...!"

'No.

'You can't do that. No.'

"You know? I actually came back to this island because I wanted to spend the rest of my life killing you in the execution grounds underneath the castle. But when the viscount told me everything, I... I couldn't bring myself to do that. But... I still couldn't forgive you."

"Then—"

"I'm forgiving you to *punish* you. I... I won't let you repent for what you did."

Punishment existed for atonement.

It was salvation for someone who wished to repent for their crimes.

But Elsa had declared:

Because she could not forgive him, she would forgive him.

To let Theo know that his sins could never be forgiven. To bind his heart forever.

"Elsa."

"So... don't ever forgive me, either. I wish I never met you... I wish I never loved you... Even now, I feel like things would have been fine if only you weren't around. So please... don't ever forgive me...!" Elsa said, her back turned to Theo. He was again lost for words.

"Finding happiness among humans... it was a dream that could never come true. But I still dreamed. And I dragged you into this. So please don't ever forgive me, Theo..."

He hated his own ignorance.

He hated his own powerlessness.

He hated his own youth.

Why couldn't he think of words to say to her at a time like this?

At the same time, he thought to himself that he had no right to console her. Theo lay spread-eagle on the ground and looked up at the night sky.

"From now on, I'll be murdered every moment of my life, for all eternity." Theo mumbled, looking up at the unchanging stars in the sky—stars that had shone since before the birth of humans or vampires.

"I'm going to make sure I don't die and find salvation by accident. I'll become as close to immortal as a vampire can get."

Elsa was silent.

She also did not know what to say.

Knowing this, Theo continued without waiting for an answer.

"But... let me just say one thing."

"...What is it?"

"Back when I played with you on this island... I was still human, but I was so happy."

Silence enveloped them once more.

Seconds passed by like moments of eternity.

The wind caressed them both—

"You're terrible, Theo..."

Before Theo knew it, Elsa was crying.

"Do you have any idea... how cruel you're being...?"

"I know. But... I had to tell you."

Theo remained where he was, lying on the ground.

He would have been perfectly happy to be killed by Elsa.

That was what he wanted.

But Elsa could not allow him to repent.

Holding his hand, she broke into sobs.

As Elsa choked back tears, Theo also began to cry.

Holding back the urge to cry out as she did, he shed tears in silence.

So that his sobs would not hurt her.

The night sky in Growerth, the rushing breeze—it was almost frustratingly identical to any other day.

That was the very thing that saddened them both. Theo and Elsa wept together.

On and on,

So that their wounds would never heal.

†

Present day. Underground, Waldstein Castle. The laboratory.

"Then, I came under the viscount's protection... and things came to this."

<Doctor...>

"About how you were born... I'm sure I'll have another chance to tell you someday. But that's not as much of Elsa's story as it is Theresia's. If I ever find my courage, I'll bring it up with you."

With that, there was silence.

But Theo slowly walked up to Professor and leaned against the coffin.

<D-Doctor?>

"I'm sorry. Just... let me stay this way for a while..."

<...>

Professor said nothing more, supporting Doctor's back.

She knew.

Doctor was crying.

†

There was something that they did not realize.

In an inconspicuous corner on the underside of the desk, Doubs Hewley had planted a bug.

And as a result, one more vampire came to know the truth Doctor tried to hide.

†

A forest in southern Germany.

"It can't be..."

Theo and Elsa's past was played through the cell phone.

Having heard everything, Rudi placed a hand on a nearby tree trunk, breaking into cold sweat.

A moment later, he dug into the tree trunk by the strength of his fingers alone and cried defiantly,

"You're lying! This... this is all a trick!"

<Who knows? Maybe it is. At this point, we've got no proof one way or another. But ya never know. Someone *just* might have the truth you're lookin' for.>

"No... but... if that's all true, why...? Why was I...?!"

<You're livin' proof that humans and vampires could coexist. Though it depends on if Elsa really *did* want to suck your blood or not, you were a happy family right up 'til Theo showed up.>

Rudi, who had rejected the coexistence of humans and vampires more than anyone else, had once lived happily with a vampire without knowing.

It was an ironic truth. If he accepted it as a fact, then what about everything he had done up until that day?

Rudi could not acknowledge it.

His entire body shook as he slowly knelt down on the mountain slope.

Reflected in his eyes was not anger or despair.

It was not an emotion to begin with. Rather, an instinctive glint of rejection.

His heart had determined that acceptance of that fact would be the end of him. His agitation was forcibly held back as his breathing grew ragged and heat rushed to his heart.

Rudi would not be able to move until he had regained his calm.

"Ah—"

Michael glimpsed something in his line of sight.

A light that had been prowling at a slight distance was growing closer. An Eater must have heard Rudi's cry.

Horst also noticed the light. He glanced down at Rudi, who was still kneeling with his face pale, and shouted into his cell phone.

"H-hey! That wasn't exactly the best time, asshole!"

<Good point. But seriously, man. I couldn't help myself, yanno? *Anything* to shut Rudi up.>

The voice on the cell phone sighed, not sounding in the least bit apologetic. Horst raised his phone into the air, just about ready to throw it to the ground.

<Whoa, hold it! Hold up, buddy! You're still good over there!>

"Like I'd believe that!"

The light drew closer and closer as they argued.

The Eater must have figured out where they were. They probably spotted Rudi, who was immobile and closest to him. The Eater fixed the grip on his knife and began to sprint across the slope with the speed of a professional athlete.

"...!"

'Is this the end?'

Rudi smiled faintly, prepared to accept death—

"Look out!"

But at that moment, a figure leapt in between them without a moment's hesitation.

'Michael!

'Why... why the hell is he trying to save me...?!'

No sooner than he had asked himself, Rudi realized that he already knew the answer.

'Right...

'Because this guy's an idiot.'

Not knowing that Rudi was thinking so badly of him, Michael leapt forward without thinking. He did not intend to die a dog's death—after all, he had to become happy with Ferret. But his impulsive character propelled him toward Rudi.

Even if Michael had the time to think, he would have stepped forward anyway.

If he abandoned someone to die here, then perhaps he could never make Ferret happy.

Rudi knew: Michael would give his life for his beliefs, no matter how stubborn and pretentious, without a moment's thought.

And he also understood—

That was precisely why Michael could so easily trust the vampire girl.

The blade rushed forward. It lunged forth.

The Eater switched his target to Michael, who was now closer. But he showed no sign of slowing down. Though he could sense no vampiric presence from the boy, the Eater's eyes peering through the cloth wrapped over his face showed no hint of hesitation.

"Damn it!" Horst cried, convinced of Michael's death.

<C'mon, man. I said it's gonna be fine.

<They're just about here.>

Then, there was a sound. The roar of an engine. And a massive lump of metal fell from the sky.

With a dampened impact, it flew directly onto the Eater's head.

Horst and Alma realized that the unconscious Eater had just been crushed by a motorcycle.

Michael, however, first looked at the two figures on the seats.

And when he saw the person on the back seat, every ounce of worry left his body as he ran straight to her.

"Ferret!"

Shattering the tension in the air to bits, Michael went to his 'sweetheart'.

Ferret was truly relieved to see him unhurt, and smiled.

And with that angelic look, she slapped Michael on the cheek with positively demonic force and sent him flying into the mountain slope.

She was considerate enough to keep him away from tree roots and rocks, but those who did not have the chance to notice that watched in bewilderment.

"Honestly... Are you happy now, Michael?! Are you happy that you made me worry so?!"

Ferret withdrew her smile and emotionlessly stepped off the motorcycle.

Michael looked up at her with a grin, prepared to joke around—

But when he saw the tears welling up in her eyes, he stopped himself and said one word.

"...Sorry."

"...You idiot."

With that, Ferret, gently held out her left hand.

"I'm so glad you're all right." She whispered, so only Michael could hear.

Even the blue-haired werewolf, with his superhuman sense of hearing, pretended that he did not hear a word.

At the same time, the only being who could have matched up such a well-timed rescue—Hackey Mouse, who had been giving Ferret directions—said into both Horst's and Ferret's cell phones.

<See? Told ya it'd be fine.>

†

The east side of the woods, on the road.

Surging before the Eaters around the trailer was darkness itself.

Black shadows rushed toward them, transformed into darkness given mass.

Heading the charge of shadows was one gigantic bat, gliding over the ground like a bullet in motion.

In the shadow cast under the bat, another bat made of shadow emerged into the third dimension and lifted off the ground.

The shadow-bat cast yet another shadow on the ground, creating another bat in its wake.

The darkness grew again and again, and a wave of shadow-bats, with the real bat in the lead, came crashing over them.

The avalanche of darkness gave the Eaters no time to think. It overwhelmed them all with incredible mass.



"AAAARRRRRRGGGGHHHH!"

Although it was only made of shadow, the avalanche did indeed possess mass. And whatever the scientific explanation, it was true that the Eaters on standby on the road had been swept away.

"Damn it... run for it!"

Those who were lucky enough to avoid the wave began to look left and right, trying to find the source of the bizarre attack.

Then, the avalanche began to slow as a certain vampire emerged from its center.

"Damn it. I *said* I was gonna be fine on my own. You're s'pposed to be my brother, not my *mother*."

The blond vampire, dressed like an ordinary young man of his physical age, grumbled to himself with a toy gun in each hand.

"Shit. When they said we were fighting a bunch of Eaters, I was expecting someone on Rudi's or that Shizune chick's level. Hey, assholes. You say you're Eaters, but you've only ever taken a couple of bites at most, am I right?"

The man shook his head, clearly disappointed.

The Eaters around him, still wary of the squirming shadows, set their sights on the blond vampire.

"Whoa there. Aren't you raring to go?"

Twisting his lips into a grin, the gunman slowly pointed his weapons at the air.

"Y'know, whenever I watch TV, I root for the villain's nameless underlings. The ones who can't do a goddamned thing against the hero. Maybe one day, they'll team up to kill the hero and turn their weakness into their strength."

As he spoke, the man shot multiple black masses into the air.

"So, hey. I'm rootin' for ya."

There was no noise to signal gunfire, though there were no silencers on the guns.

But it was clear that something had been shot into the sky.

The Eaters sensed the unknown danger. Those among them who carried guns simultaneously opened fire on the gunman.

But before their shots reached the man, several of the projectiles launched by the vampire suddenly changed course and spiraled down at the Eaters, striking their weapons out of their hands.

"It can't be..." One Eater moaned.

The gunman was firing small bats from his guns.

They were homing projectiles that moved at bullet-speed.

The gunners who had been aiming for the man stood gaping as their weapons fell to the ground.

At that moment, the countless bats fired into the sky began to fall upon them like shooting stars.

"...!"

Black bullets fell like hail, spinning rapidly as they tore at the Eaters' arms and shoulders.

Because they were not ordinary bats, their fangs were never broken and their bodies never damaged. They mercilessly tore through the Eaters, leaving spouts of blood in their wake.

"Everyone scatter! Under the trees, now!"

Following one Eater's instructions, the others made to flee the rain of death.

But the moment they stepped into the woods, they found themselves bound by something, unable to move.

"?!"

When they looked, they noticed thin white strings hanging between the trailer and the woods. Although it was impossible to see at first glance, some of the strings were glinting thanks to the lights from the trailer.

'This is... a spiderweb...?'

Although it was a spiderweb in texture, the Eaters could not shake it off. The strings would stretch like elastic, but would not break.

By the time they realized that it was not an ordinary spiderweb, a little boy had emerged from the woods.

"Good evening."

"...!"

The Eaters immediately sensed a vampiric presence from the boy.

About five or so Eaters had been caught around him, rendered completely immobile.

"So... you're the ones who got Alma into all that mess?"

The Eaters then realized:

There was something slightly different about the boy's presence from those of humanoid vampires.

"Little girls don't like murder, so I'm not going to kill any of you."

At that moment, his inhuman eyes glinted suspiciously as he put on an innocent smile—

And two carapace-covered 'legs' emerged from either side of his body.

"Wha...?"

The bodies of a mammal and an arthropod had been united within one gothic costume.

The strange vampire stretched his six arms and said with childlike innocence,

"So I'll just take your arms or one of your legs."

A second later, the earth shook as countless dots rose from the ground.

Hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of spiders.

They spread all over the ground and squirmed as though they were merely a part of the boy's body. They climbed onto the Eaters, sinking their fangs into their arms or one of their legs and injecting them with poison.

With the screams of the Hunters ringing in his ears, the boy—a king over spiders, from the way he carried himself—looked down at his vassals and sighed loudly.

"If a girl ever saw me like this... She'd hate me for sure."

"EYAAAAAAAARGH! GYAAAAAAAHHH!"

On the mountain slope, a slight distance away, a man was still screaming.

But he was not an Eater—he was an officer of the Organization.

He was Satō Ichirō the Grey.

By all appearances, he was an ordinary human being. He ran desperately from the Eaters' tenacious attacks like a bystander caught at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Why me?! Why?! Ohh, I never should have come here! I should have just stayed behind at the manor!"

As he fled, he narrowly evaded the blades and bullets rushing at him from every direction.

He was quite deft and agile, even by vampire standards, but he seemed to be unaware of the fact as he shrieked and flailed.

"Oh no—"

A blade passed right before his eyes, but he instantly turned himself into fog and let it pass through. That was when the blade hit an Eater who was about to attack Satō from behind.

"Th-that was close!"

The man drove his enemies to confusion, in spite of the fact that all he did was run away in tears.

The officers who were watching him from afar all made their own comments.

"Y'know, if you think about it, isn't Ichirō one heck of a vampire?"

"Too bad he's too sycophantic to notice."

"This also is the guidance of karma... *namonamo*." "You're food! You're food!"

As they watched Satō's one-man show from the safety of the treetops, the officers suddenly noticed the Eaters being attacked from behind.

The Eaters fell with their tendons torn apart, eyes round with pain and shock. As they looked back at their attacker, each exclaimed the same word.

"A chihuahua?!"

"I am a wolf!"

With the same response as usual, the vampire dog butted the Eaters on their chins to knock them unconscious. The peanut gallery on the treetops watched dubiously.

"...Well, Wol is a chihuahua."

"But that's... quite the argument."

"This also is the guidance of karma... *Guten tag*."

"What... what the hell is this..." An Eater stammered, unable to process the scene before him.

"W-weren't Eaters supposed to be vampires' natural enemies?"

The answer came from the vampire standing before him.

"No frog would fear the eggs of a serpent. Eaters are our natural enemy, yes. But to produce so many, your leaders could have fed you no more than one vampire per person. Perhaps you would need to have devoured a hundred or more to be truly considered our natural enemy. And truth be told, we are not like the rabble who act alone. We are rather long-lived, you see."

"F-forget that, you monster! Are you even a vampire...?!"

"What is this, now? I am a monster, just as you say. I am a vampire. I suppose if you ever met Steel Blue, Iron, or Deep Deep Deep Blue, you would die of heart failure."

The officer was a quintessential 'Other', his creaking body like an alien straight out of Hollywood.

His dark grey body easily repelled the Eater's silver blade, and his honed claws cut his gun like a hot knife through butter.

The Eater made up his mind to escape from this monster.

Unlike Rudi, these Eaters had not chosen this path out of hatred or a desire for revenge.

They had no reason to die there like dogs.

"Damn it!"

The moment he turned and ran, he felt something at his feet.

'...Is this... *piano wire*...?'

The moment the thought registered in his mind, he saw a flash of light on either side of him.

"Would you look at that. Camouflage's skeletons' work, you think?"

"Probably. Or one of Crimson's self-destruct attacks."

Yellow and Aiji idly commented on the officers' progress, standing on the road with no foes left to defeat.

"Christ. Talk about being uselessly bizarre. Every one of our officers."

"You think so?"

"Sure, we've got *normal* people like Satō the Grey, but then we've got freaking spiders like Fannie. Two robots, a chihuahua, and a T-Rex. Then there's Dark Grey and Azure, but I don't even know *what* I'm s'pposed to call them..."

"Vampires. Just like alligators, frogs, and snakes are all considered reptiles, we're no more than monsters under the category of 'vampires'." Aiji said sagaciously.

Yellow thought for a moment and frowned.

"...Aren't frogs supposed to be amphibians?"

"...!"

Realizing his mistake, Aiji quickly looked around. Making sure that no one else had heard, he concealed his shock.

"...Don't tell anyone. I'd rather keep my pride as an officer."

Yellow paused. Then,

"Your 'pride as an officer'?"

From afar, he watched an officer trying to hit on a female Eater and end up with a smack in the face. Yellow grinned wryly.

"Not like a lot of us have any of that."

†

In front of the Mars country house.

"What...is that...?"

Ten meters above the head of Romy Mars.

There, parallel to the ground, floated a gigantic silver disk.

The Eaters froze and cautiously glared up at the mysterious wheel.

The disk, reflecting the light shining from the trailer, looked almost like an inverted silver stage.

Levillio, the Clan vampire, also looked upon it suspiciously.

'That is an unfamiliar sight.'

But once his eyes grew used to the glare, he corrected himself.

'Are those... arms?'

Weapons.

The great disk floating in the sky.

It was a collection of thousands upon thousands of sharp objects arranged in a circle, spinning rapidly in the air.

"What...?!"

The weapons were probably being controlled with telekinesis. That was understandable, as many vampires had that power—even members of Levillio's Clan.

But what shocked him was the number of weapons at Romy's disposal.

The disk gradually began to slow, revealing its intricate details to the world.

At the center of it all was one gigantic disk. It looked like a wheel made of pure silver.

Around the wheel were two gigantic scythes, their blades bent at an elegant curve. Outside that circle was a circle of four halberds, and outside that was a circle of eight axes.

Each circle was made of a different kind of weapon, and the size of the blades grew smaller as the circles spread further.

Although it was impossible to count them all, if the number of blades doubled at each layer:

One disk. Two gigantic scythes. Four halberds. Eight axes. Sixteen broadswords. Thirty-two silver stakes. Sixty-four katanas. A hundred and twenty-eight European swords. Two

hundred and fifty-six chakrams. Five hundred and twelve daggers. One thousand and twenty-four knives. Two thousand and forty-eight needles. A positively deranged number of weapons floating in the air.

"What... is that...?"

Gardastance calmly put out his cigar on a portable ashtray and replied.

"Hm? Didn't our *traitor* tell you? Those blades circling around the silver disk known as Castlevania... I suppose 'Special Attack' is too cheap a term. What to call it? ...Of course. That disk above Romy is something you might call her own 'style'."

"Mr. Rude." Romy said, looking quite serious.

"Hm? Do you have an objection, Romy?"

"I like 'Special Attack'."

"...I suppose I won't question your personal preferences... In conclusion, this is her 'Special Attack'. We call it the 'Silver-wheel Stage'."

The Eaters ignored Gardastance as he laughed elegantly, and turned their attention to the blades.

Was she planning to throw them all at once with telekinesis? With their numbers, the Eaters could come out of such an attack alive. In the worst case scenario, they could have some of their own focus on defense and ambush so they could be used as human shields.

But at that moment,

"If you intend to run our Organization to the ground, I will meet your challenge."

Romy had already taken hold of a sword. She began to whisper something.

"O frail warrior of spirit bold, destroy the abyssal darkness' wandering soul! Spelunker!"

The moment she recited her spell-like words,

The blade of her sword began to glow radiantly.

"?!"

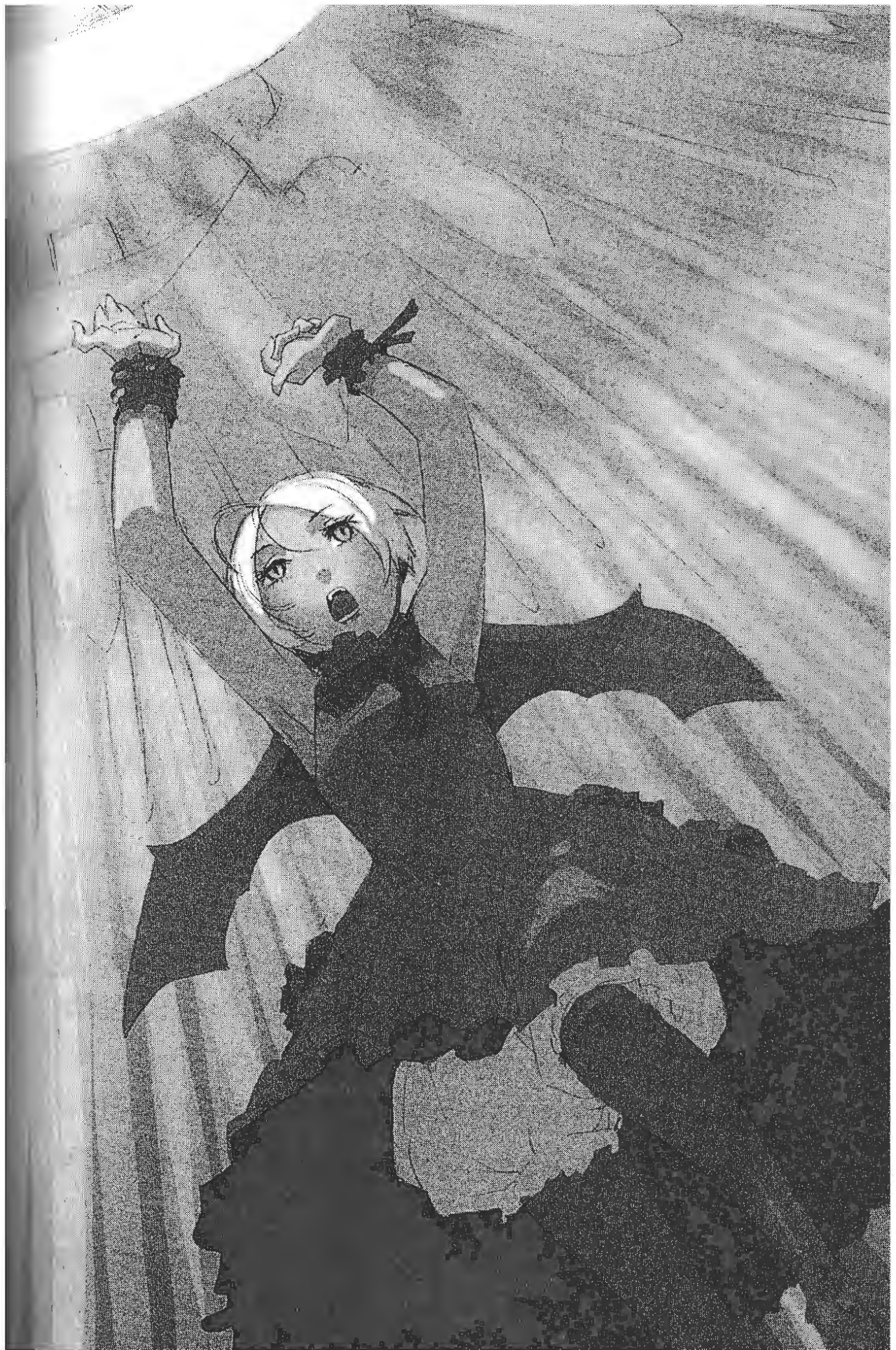
The light easily overpowered the spotlights on the trailer. It was enough to knock unconscious any bats or birds that might have been flying past.

Eaters were not immune to flash attacks.

As they reflexively shut their eyes and shrank back, Romy took a step forward and swung her sword.

The Eaters around her felt an impact.

"Gah... Ugh...?!"



Their bodies had been struck by 'somethings' at the speed of a machine gun.

Romy had neither thrown her blade nor fired a gun.

But the moment she swung, incredible power shot through space and hit the Eaters' bodies.

'Is this... telekinesis?! It's too strong...!'

"Damn you... Hold your ground! She can't overpower you with strength alone!"

Realizing what Romy was doing, Levillio shouted orders to his Eaters.

But the Eaters' eyes had not yet recovered. Romy took the opportunity to raise her sword 'Spelunker' into the air.

The sword then floated on its own back into the silver stage. In exchange, multiple swords flew down and began to circle around her protectively.

"Escape the hellfires of viridian thread and pierce the rift of infinite dread! Dig Dug!"

At her call, the silver, drill-shaped stakes sliced through the air and shot the spotlights like armor-piercing bullets. Sparks flew everywhere, and Levillio hurriedly stepped away from the trailer.

Romy continued to recite her spells, her blades twirling to her will each time.

"I shall encircle all, ere resurrection and fall! Libble Rabble!"

Two knives flew in opposite directions, zooming between the Eaters hiding in the woods.

The blades were connected by threads of telekinesis, and as the knives flew, the Eaters were tied to the trees one after another.

"O fierce and noble knight, fall to crimson despair and cut down the light! Red Arremer!"

With a katana in hand, Romy spun as though dancing.

At that moment, something struck the Eaters—and only the Eaters—surrounding the manor.

A sudden gust of wind sped between them, and in the blink of an eye, wounds appeared on their bodies as blood spewed in the darkness.

Romy took up another sword and cried out,

"O sacred planet's lifeblood, return to your place in a torrential flood! Field Combat!"

'What... is all this...?'

Instead of falling to the ground, the Eaters' blood began to reach upwards like a plant growing at incredible speeds. The blood was sucked into the silver disk spinning above Romy's head.

The blood was swirling in midair.

By the time Dorothy commented, "It looks just like Gerhardt", most of the Eaters were rendered immobile from the blood loss.

With that, the sheer number and power of the Eater army had been defanged in a matter of seconds.

"As needlessly powerful as ever. ...Hmph. And not the kind of strength I could buy with money, either." Gardastance said, praising Romy's performance in his own way.

Romy, however, shook her head and calmly took up another sword.

"Not at all. This power belongs to my weapons, not me."

"Of course. Demonic blades that respond in different ways to a vampire's telekinesis. But it's worth commending the fact that you've collected so many, if nothing else. ...Come to think of it, I've heard that there are katanas and broadswords that possess wills of their own. Have you one of those?"

"That's outside my specialty, I'm afraid. Although I would love to own one for myself..."

Gold and Silver lost themselves to idle chatter, even as their enemy stood before them.

But no attack would ever reach them.

Most of the Eaters were fully unconscious at that point, and those that remained were completely demoralized. The lights in the distance began to disappear as the Eaters began to abandon Levillio.

"I've said this before, but perhaps you could do something about that 'poetry' you recite when you use your weapons? There's the chance you could be attacked before you finish." Gardastance said plainly. Romy put on a confident grin.

"That's true, and people always tell me it's 'childish' or 'like the teenage years I want to forget'. But you know, calling out attack names and calling out incantations... it's a romantic dream!"

"A dream? Then I suppose I can't question your choices."

Instantly accepting Romy's argument, Gardastance laughed and turned to the trailer.

"To immortal beings like us, romantic dreams can become ideals by which we swear. Tell me. Do you have dreams?"

Levillio, who stood blankly in front of the trailer, did not answer. Instead, he moaned absently.

"It... can't be..."

"I understand how shocking it must be for your proud army of Eaters to have fallen. But at times like this, a little retail therapy might lift your spirits. If you have no money on your person, I can easily provide you with ten thousand dollars as a consolation gift. Now, take it and leave."

Not even listening to Gardastance, Levillio glared at Doubs.

"What is the *meaning* of this?! You never told me this would happen!"

"Heh heh heh. You never asked. In fact, why *didn't* you, Master Levillio?" Doubs replied lackadaisically. Levillio clenched his fists and shook.

"You bastard...! You were a double agent! Pretending to betray your allies while setting me up for a trap!"

"What an astounding accusation! Me, a double agent? That is nothing short of an impossible insult!"

The man in the iridescent suit spread his arms wide and leapt onto the trailer. He then announced to anyone who could be his audience—the officers by the gates, the still-conscious Eaters, and the outraged Levillio.

"It is embarrassing to say, but including the Organization, your humble servant Doubs Hewley is currently affiliated with four Clans, three anti-vampire groups, two nations, five individuals, and one gang! Perish the thought of double agents! I am a *vigintuple* agent! Far beyond the likes of spies who pass information between only two groups! I'd gladly sell off information on any group and lure them into a trap!"

"Don't make me laugh!"

In contrast to the indignant vampire, the Organization officers watched with disinterest.

Levillio took notice of their reactions and lashed out at Gardastance.

"Bastards... you knew all this from the start?!"

The answer came from Dorothy, who had been looking on in awe.

"I thought *everyone* knew that Doubs was a traitor."

"...What?"

"When Doubs first attended one of our conferences, he introduced himself as an informant who sells intelligence to others. The Organization keeps sensitive information away from him on principle."

Although it sounded like a joke, Dorothy was dead serious.

"Y-you never said a thing about—"

Doubs snickered.

"If I told you that I was an informant, you would have gotten angry at me."

"Naturally!"

"Well, the Organization does not. Of course, Mr. Caldimir hates me so much that he won't tell me a thing."

The Iridescent Extra laughed, personifying the color of his title. Levillio ground his teeth, but he desperately steered his anger toward the other Organization members.

"Just what are you?! Are you not an organization?! I don't understand!"

"We are vampires."

"You? Vampires like us?! Deplorable! You accept the likes of dogs and sharks into your ranks!"

"That is merely a matter of perspective."

Gardastance took a step forward and spoke for the Organization.

"From the perspective of the Clans, centered around blood relations, it is natural that the label of 'vampire' be applied only to select individuals. But the Organization is not concerned with who is or isn't a vampire. What we focus on is the relationship vampires have with human society."

Gardastance produced a cigar from his pocket and began to walk closer to Levillio.

"Vampires, by nature, avoid contact with human society. After all, we are not human to begin with—just as insects do not obey human laws. Of course, whether our unfettered state is good or bad to humanity depends on the situation."

He explained things not as a lecturer, but as a friend introducing a new appliance. But there was still a tone of pride in his voice.

"But on the other hand, many vampires live in human society. Like us. While on one hand, we are free from their laws, on the other we enjoy everything good their world has to offer. A powerful vampire, you see, is like an independent nation. Should he be hostile to humanity, or friendly? The outcome is a result of the relationships between individual humans and vampires."

Gardastance lit his cigar and sucked on it. Then, he continued his explanation as he exhaled.

"The Organization merely tries to embrace that majority. I am repeating what Gerhardt told us in the past: Unless it disadvantages all of vampirekind, we must accept all ideologies and individuals. Of course, when Caldimir was in charge, Gerhardt's ideals waned and the Organization also took part in attacking other vampires."

Gardastance stopped. He lowered his voice.

Although he was by nature a proud man, at that very moment he neither condescended upon his foe nor praised himself. His every word was filled with nothing but pure determination.

"And if you would still choose to try and destroy the Organization, I swear—not as a member of the Organization, but as the individual—the independent country—known as Rude Gardastance. Right here and now, my individual 'nation' will declare war on your 'society'."

"...I'll *annihilate* you, you insolent worm!"

Gardastance once more returned to his usual proud self.

"Hmph. Seeing as you've limited your threat to me alone, I suppose Romy's weapons must have given you quite the scare."

"You son of a—"

Levillio began to give off bloodlust as his muscles shifted audibly.

As the Clan member prepared for battle, his appearance still unchanged, Gardastance commented,

"I'd almost forgotten. I suppose I should sprinkle some salt on you before our battle."

"...What?"

"The food at the party just wasn't enough for her, you see. I suggest you run while you still can."

Not understanding what Gardastance was talking about, Levillio prepared to tear out his throat.

But at that moment, he sensed a strange vibration underfoot.

'...*An earthquake?*'

There was a new sound accompanying the sparks crackling from the remains of the spotlights. Not only that, he spotted the still-conscious Eaters at the edges of his vision running from something in terror.

'What...?'

At that moment, he felt something like water dripping onto his head.

And when he looked up,

He saw a great reptilian maw—

And in the span of two seconds, Levillio's upper body entered the jaws of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

†

The east side of the forest.

"Anyway, how'd you get here, Ferret?" Michael asked, having been saved from his life-threatening predicament.

"...That is what *I* would like to ask *you*! Just *why*—"

Ferret was just about ready to pour out her frustrations on Michael.

But a bald man on a motorcycle, who had arrived shortly after her, interrupted.

"They noticed us, Miss Ferret. We gotta get outta here."

As if on cue, the blue-haired man stepped off his motorcycle and took off his shirt.

"We'll take care of 'em. You go on ahead."

Before the man even finished his sentence, the two newcomers transformed themselves into humanoid wolves.

"Whoa?!"

Horst screamed and embraced Alma protectively.

Alma also opened her eyes wide, having never seen werewolves before.

But Michael flashed them an encouraging grin.

"Don't worry. These guys are good people."

His smile was pure and trusting.

Under any other circumstances, it might have been worrying to see such undoubting innocence. But now, Michael provided Alma and Horst with complete reassurance.

"You're coming too, Rudi. C'mon, get up!" Michael said, trying to pull Rudi back to his feet.

But because his right hand was paralyzed, Michael had to struggle with his left hand alone.

'...Oh.'

Rudi was again shaken.

He saw with his own two eyes how Michael's right hand was rendered unusable—

And at that moment, Ferret stepped in.

"Ah... Aaah—"

Rudi's eyes brimmed with terror at the sight of her. He remembered how she commanded him to disappear from her sight back on Growerth.

At the time, his outrage at Theo was enough to overpower any other emotion. It was easy for him to ignore Ferret's anger.

But the way he was now, Rudi was fearful even of his own memories.

Ferret stared at Rudi for a moment.

Then, she silently reached out and took hold of his arm as he flinched, pulling him up alongside Michael.

Not understanding what was happening, Rudi looked on blankly.

"Wh-why are you... after everything I did...?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about. I have never met a cowardly man like you in all my life."

She was suppressing her frustration, avoiding Rudi's eyes at all costs as she quietly confessed,

"And... just before I arrived, Michael was trying to save you. I could not leave you here after that."

Unable to respond, Rudi quietly took to his feet.

"I'm... all right now."

With that, he stepped forward to take the lead.

So that no one could see his foolish face.

So that he would not be shaken any more by the sight of Michael and Ferret.

The words from the cell phone still lingered with him.

'But I...'

Whether the cell phone was telling the truth or not, all Rudi could think of was the face of a certain boy.

'...I have to get revenge on Theo.'

Even if revenge was wrong, Rudi had no other choice.

Now that he had been betrayed by Theo and Theresia, and his trust in his sister shaken,

Rudi no longer had anything he could believe in.

Including himself.

The remaining Eaters, having sensed Ferret's presence, simultaneously lunged at the group.

Rudi and the two werewolves stood in their way, but for every Eater they knocked out, two more drew near.

"There's no end to 'em."

"These Eaters are just strong enough to get in our way. But if we went all-out, we'd end up killing them."

The werewolves, though technically not human, had official human records. The Eaters they faced probably did as well. Killing them would cause problems further down the line, and the werewolves were uncomfortable with allowing Michael and the little girl to witness murder.

If things came down to it, they would kill their foes. But it was not yet that time. The werewolves considered leaping to safety with everyone in their arms, but setting everyone's weight aside, they could not risk being attacked before they got into a stable position.

In Rudi's case, he was not at all enthusiastic about killing humans.

Eventually, lights from even further away began to approach. They could see a number easily double that of the Eaters they had defeated coming closer.

"...I shall fight as well. We will minimize our disadvantage if we cover four sides."

"I'll—"

"No!" Ferret cried, cutting off Michael, and quietly clenched her fists.

'I might end up dying here.'

'I haven't even told Michael how I felt.'

'But... I will never allow Michael to go through such pain ever again!'

She prepared herself to defend not only the boy she so treasured, but everything he was trying to protect as well.

And the moment the lights finally reached their group—

The Eaters suddenly clutched at their throats and fell to the ground, groaning.

"What...?"

"What's going on here?"

Rudi and the werewolves were taken aback by the sudden development.

The Eaters were all twitching on the ground, the whites of their eyes showing.

And,

A second later, blood spewed from the mouths of the Eaters—

And formed letters of blood in front of Ferret.

[I apologize for being so late, Ferret.]

"F-Father?!" "Viscount Waldstein!" "Sir!"

Ferret, Michael, and the werewolves cried out at once.

[My word... it's truly a relief that I choked these Eaters in time.]

Another light approached them, but this lantern was being carried by bats with human eyes.

The bats placed the lantern on the ground and instantly converged, forming the body of a vampire.

"I've taken care of this side, Gerhardt."

[You've made quick work of them, I see. Are you unhurt, Melhilm?]

"Your concern is unnecessary, Gerhardt. But in any case... I see that this is the state of Eaters who have taken in so little power. I'm surprised that the Clans thought this would be enough of a weapon against us."

[Ah, perhaps they would have had more success with ordinary human mercenaries. Perhaps the Organization should explore the option of hiring humans ourselves.]

"That won't be necessary. If needed, we can always ask for Rude's cooperation."

Horst and Alma looked on blankly at the laid-back conversation. The vampire aside, the floating pool of blood forming letters in the air must have given them quite a shock.

Michael and the others, meanwhile, realized that the conversation signaled the end of the tense chase through the woods. They also noticed that the sounds of battle were fading from the forest.

As relief spread through his body, Michael called to the girl who had resolved to protect him from the Eaters.

"Ferret."

"Wh-what is it?"

When she turned, she found Michael's face right in front of hers. She had no time to put on airs or a mask of indifference.

Whether he understood that or not, Michael mumbled to her,

"Thank you."

I was not doing this for your sake, Ferret would normally have replied.

But Michael's smile was so familiar—so little different from his usual expression—that she realized something.

She had not made up her mind to protect him in order to convey her emotions, loose her anger, or save him from peril.

She had just wanted to see him smile.

One look was enough to wipe away her confession and the anger she bottled up. Noticing that, Ferret looked straight into his eyes.

"...You are terrible, Michael."

"Huh? What?"

Michael was confused. But by that point, Ferret had already turned around.

Hidden from his sight,

Ferret was wearing a smile very much like Michael's.

The distant eastern skies began to glow.

The hour of vampires had come to an end, beckoning the time of humanity.

†

The Mars family country house. The recreation room.

"It's all over." Caldimir mumbled as he received the news from a subordinate. He moved one of his chess pieces.

"And Garde?"

Sitting across from him as his opponent was Laetitia, who had done nothing during this incident.

"Gerhardt managed to convince that lunatic to stay back. If Garde joined the fray, we'd have nothing left but a load of corpses and a lot of headaches to deal with on the human side. And speaking of which, I'm surprised you weren't there to watch the show in person."

"You know how much I hate Doubs Hewley."

"Is this what they mean by 'hating your own kind'?"

"Affirmative."

The woman in the military uniform acknowledged the point with surprising ease, moving one of her chess pieces as well. "And what about you?"

"I'm not going to let them say I sat around doing nothing. I plan to take care of the rest of our problems."

"Oh?"

"To make it so that this entire mess was a conflict between humans, which was solved by humans. ...Zygmunt."

At Caldimir's call, a woman dressed like a secretary bowed from a corner of the room.

"Yes, Comrade Caldimir?"

"_____."

"Understood."

The woman called Zygmunt bowed once more at Caldimir's command and left the room without a word.

"Hmm... That's an interesting move." Caldimir said, impressed.

No longer concerned with the incident, he focused his thoughts on the game at hand.

"Heh heh heh... A masterful strategy, I'll grant you. But don't think you can outwit me with this." Caldimir cackled dramatically. Laetitia looked at him with a hint of seriousness in her face.

"Caldimir."

"What."

"I know nothing about the rules of chess. All I've done was mirror your moves."

"..."

Caldimir froze. Laetitia snickered.

"A masterful strategy, eh?"

Several seconds later, the room was filled with Caldimir's embarrassed scream. But the sound attracted the attention of no one, fading into the halls of the gigantic mansion.

†

The next morning.

It was in a city in southern Germany.

Until the previous night, some of the people who lived in this city harbored an intense fear in their hearts.

There was a rumor that the people who lived in the mountain village were all vampires.

Those who half-jokingly hired a group to annihilate the village.

Those who, in all seriousness, hired a group to annihilate the village.

Those who, knowing nothing, fell prey to the rumors and began to suspect the surviving girl.

And those who set fire to her guardian's home.

Hearing that the girl had been taken away by her guardian the previous night, those people sighed in relief.

The seeds of fear had been finally eliminated, they thought.

Even those who hired the Hunters found peace of mind, finally freed from the vampiric presence in their midst.

But their bodies felt a little heavy, perhaps due to all the stress of the past few weeks.

Many people awoke and headed for their sinks as they did every morning.

There, they realized something.

Tiny droplets of blood were falling from their necks.

When they followed the trail of blood, they noticed two small, circular wounds.

However, this had happened at most of the houses in the city.

To those who had nothing to be guilty about, they were little more than tiny insect bites.

But to those who understood what they meant, the wounds were as good as cursed marks.

The deeper their guilt, the stronger the curse.

They were trapped in an inescapable abyss of fear.

The night of humans and vampires was finally erased by the morning sun.

As though the darkness of night had never existed to begin with.

Epilogue: Humans and Vampires

Evening, the Mars estate.

<The police are continuing their investigation into the connection between the mass disappearance and the riots that took place last night on the roads. Because many people in the city are beginning to testify that the disappeared villagers were actually vampires, and that they hired professionals to exorcise them, the police are beginning to investigate the possibility of a cult or a new religion that believes in vampires—>

A highly distorted version of the morning's events were being broadcast on the news on the parlor television.

<—In related news, the sudden influx of belated testimonies has driven the city into a mild state of panic. Some citizens even raised a commotion, claiming to have been *bitten* by a vampire overnight. The police also suspect that such people may be connected to the suspects arrested in last night's riot—>

Blankly watching the news, On one hand, Horst wondered if the events of the previous night had all been a dream. On the other hand, he told himself that the arrest of nearly three hundred rioters only emphasized the reality of his experiences.

"Do not worry about your current position. I've spoken to the right people in the right places. Continue to live as you did before. And this might be a rather small price for your silence, but I will also pay for your new house out of my own pocket."

When the man called Gardastance said this to him that morning, Horst wondered then, too, if he was dreaming.

The Gardastance Group was well-known, even in Germany. And the former chairman of that multinational corporation was right before his eyes, claiming to be a vampire. How could Horst possibly believe?

Alma, the victim of the incident, was set to stay at the Mars family's estate for the time being.

It was decided that it would be best to keep her out of the public eye, at least until the commotion settled. Horst agreed with the Organization's decision.

To be specific, he could not bring himself to disagree.

'In the end... I didn't know a thing about Alma.'

When he and Alma were led into the manor and surrounded by the Organization members, she met their gazes and said,

"Please make me a vampire."

There was an uncharacteristically determined glint in her eye.

That was when a pool of red liquid wrote out a response for her.

[Do you ask this of us in order to get revenge on the humans? Or is it that you wish to become like the people you loved? If it is the latter, I would suggest that you wait until you have matured. And if it is the former, I would also advise you to wait for the right opportunity.]

"..."

[If you wish to avenge the people of your village, or clarify the city's misunderstanding and make those responsible regret what they did, I have no right to try and stop you. But I will advise you; if you truly wish to reclaim the honor of the villagers—the vampires who loved you and were loved by you—then you must remain human. You must remain human and resolve the conflict in the language of humanity in order to most clearly prove the fact that humans and vampires can truly coexist.]

"...I don't understand."

Alma probably meant exactly what she said. She was hanging her head.

The red letters reformed into an arrow and pointed toward Michael.

[That boy over there is just like you in that he loves vampires. But in his case, vampires are not the only beings he loves. He holds passionate love for humanity, as well.]

"..."

[You know many good things about the vampires who lived in your village. Now, you must learn about the many good things humanity has to offer. The villagers had the choice of living apart from the human world, sequestering themselves from contact. And yet they chose to interact with humans and showed love to a human like you.]

The pool of blood sloshed nostalgically and slowly wrote out for the girl,

[If you love those vampires, it will do you no harm to try and learn a little more about what they also loved. It won't be too late to become a vampire after you've come to know. So I suggest that you give thought to the people who care for you deeply at this moment.]

The pool of blood called Gerhardt probably knew that his advice was not foolproof; he refused to force Alma into a choice, instead giving her time to think things over herself.

[After all, it is not a bad thing at all to have many places to which one can return.]

'That pool of blood knew exactly what to tell her.

'But I... All I did was hurt Alma.'

Lost in self-hatred, Horst looked out into the courtyard through the window.

Suddenly, someone called his name.

"Horst."

"Oh. H-hey, Alma. Say, I—"

Before Horst could apologize, Alma smiled at him.

"Thank you."

"Wha..."

"If not for you... I think... I think I really would have started to hate humans."

"..."

'No... *That's not it.*

'I only tried to protect you because I was being stubborn...'

As Horst fell deeper into guilt, Alma continued.

"Say, could you take me to the festival in Munich one day?"

"...The festival...? ...Yeah! Oktoberfest, right? That's right. You're too young to drink right now, but there's a lot of fun things you can do there. We get people visiting from all over the world! It's fun just watching everyone enjoy the festivities!"

"Promise?"

"Promise. And I'll come visit you here on my days off."

Alma pursed her lips for a moment—

She then took a deep breath and asked him something similar to what she had asked before.

"Horst? If... if I become a vampire one day, are you going to hate me?"

Horst gave her a gentle pat on the head and lied.

He wouldn't know how he felt until it actually happened. But he decided to say what he *hoped* would be his reaction.

"I'll be happy as long as you grow up to be a good person, Alma."

He knew that he was just saying whatever sounded good to hear.

But as he saw a smile spread on Alma's face, Horst made a silent wish.

That one day, Alma would have the freedom to live out such a life.

And that when the time came,

He would be capable of coming to terms with a certain answer.

The courtyard.

Alma's smiling face was visible from out the wide-open window.

Fannie, trying to get a peek at the sight, was being dragged away by his collar at Aiji's hands.

Michael, watching everything from a bench, chuckled.

"I'm glad she looks a little happier now."

"Yes... But she has lost so many people who were dear to her. I'm sure her heart has not yet healed."

Ferret hung her head, feeling a sense of connection with the girl.

She had also lost her parents to Hunters, and she had also been attacked by an Eater.

Then, she remembered Michael's right hand, and recalled what she had made up her mind to say several times over.

"But you shouldn't let that get you down, Ferret."

Michael was still being very considerate, but Ferret grew more hesitant.

She worried that, if she said something, the relationship they had now would fall apart.

As Ferret wavered silently, Michael looked at her face and wondered if she was trying to hold back a trip to the toilet.

Then, a pool of blood came slithering in their direction.

[The two of you plan to stay here a few more days, correct?]

"F-Father."

"Oh, Viscount Waldstein! Yes! I came here for a part-time job—"

[Well, concerning that job... I am here to ask about Alma.] The viscount wrote, [Michael, I would like you to live with her for some time.]

"Huh."

"...Pardon?"

Michael sounded as relaxed as ever.

Ferret froze.

[You see, the girl does not yet know very much about vampires. It was decided that you, as a fellow human, should take care of her and teach her everything she needs to know.]

"Oh, I get it!"

It looked like Michael was all for the idea. Ferret took to her feet, raising her voice.

"H-how improper! Father! *Living* with a young girl? That is simply unacceptable—*indecent!*"

"Why're you getting so angry, Ferret?"

"Wh-why? Because I..."

Ferret trailed off. The viscount twisted his body into letters again.

[My dear Ferret. You don't mean to tell me that you feel *envious* of a young girl?]

"Not at all, Father!"

"So *that's* it, huh? Don't worry, Ferret! Even if I were living with a hundred hot ladies, my heart would still belongrrrrrkkkk..."

Michael looked quite happy even as Ferret began to choke him.

Unable to hide her panic, Ferret complained, nearly in tears.

"I-I am merely concerned for the girl! She is only about twelve years old! If she falls under Michael's influence, her character may be compromised!"

The viscount watched his daughter in amusement, his body trembling in laughter as he wrote out,

[Then why not join Michael?]

"F-Father?"

[Ah, think of it this way, Ferret. That this is merely practice for when you and Michael one day have children together.]

"~~~~~!"

"That's it! You heard that, Ferret? Your father's finally accepted our relationship! Yes! Thank you! Huzzah! Grk."

Michael's face, streaked with tears of joy, was crushed by Ferret's iron fist.

"I refuse to accept it!"

†

Somewhere in Eastern Europe. Inside a castle stronghold.

"Damn you... I will never forget this humiliation..."

A certain vampire returned to his home, his breathing ragged.

It was Levillio, who had turned to fog just moments before he was digested by the dinosaur and had escaped in pieces.

The great castle was a ways away from the city, and on the surface it was only an abandoned building on private property.

But in reality, the interior of the castle was in better shape than castles renovated for tourists. It was essentially a replica of archaic aristocratic life.

The 'aristocrats' ruling over this particular castle were the vampires of the Clan from which Levillio hailed.

It was the home of the Sunford Clan, the second-weakest of the seven vampire Clans.

Most of its forces were comprised of its squad of Eaters. But the Eaters were rendered powerless, and—shamefully enough—in the custody of the human police force.

"How could I face the master now...? Those monsters... Only the likes of Dimguil could defeat them! But how do I convince that failure to listen to me...?!"

He dragged his ragged feet through the corridors, but there was no one in the castle's great hall.

Was everyone asleep in their coffins because it was daytime? But the members of the Sunford Clan were immune to sunlight. It was exceedingly rare for every member to be asleep at once.

Deciding that he had to see someone—*anyone*—from among the thirty or so members of the Clan, Levillio wandered the castle.

"That's right... I'll have to quietly look into these Christopher Lee and Sir Baskerville characters..."

Still in shock from all the confusion, he found himself believing Gardastance's bluffs.

Not even trying to prioritize, he drowned in the compulsion to find someone—

And that was when he spotted the girl in the lord's chamber.

"Oh. Hello there."

The pigtailed girl flashed him an innocent smile.

Her face was unfamiliar to him. From the color of her hair, Levillio could tell that she was not a member of their Clan.

"Who... are you?"

The outsider dared to sit in the lord's throne. Refusing to forgive the transgressor—be she a vampire or a lost human—Levillio shot her all the bloodlust he could muster. The girl slowly got up and bowed politely.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Loa."

"I never asked for your name. What are you doing here."

"Well, I wonder... I guess I could say I'm in charge of the phone. Ta-dah!♥"

The girl tossed something at Levillio with a smile.

It was a pink cell phone covered in hearts.

"What...?"

There was a call in progress. A familiar voice escaped the speaker.

<Ah, Mr. Levillio. I apologize about what happened earlier.>

"Doubs Hewley... you wretch!"

<Jumping Jehoshaphat! It is an honor to know that you remember my humble name! If it's not too much trouble, please add a side of thunderous applause the next time you see fit to call my name!>

"What is the meaning of this?!"

Levillio gnashed his teeth at the fact that the loathsome man was speaking to him from out of his reach.

<You see, I thought I'd inform you about the outstanding outcome of our bet.>

"...What...?"

<Don't pretend you've forgotten, now. You wagered your life. On that bet to see if the Organization could defeat your two hundred terrifying Eaters. And you lost. You have my conscientious condolences.>

Levillio lost his patience at Doubs' rambling.

"Damn you, Doubs Hewley! Where are you—gurk...?"

His howls of rage never found a conclusion.

"That's enough of your whining. You're just a bitch with a pedigree."

Levillio noticed something red sticking out of his chest.

Whether Doubs knew what was happening or not, he continued chatting merrily.

<In other words, I happily handed over your life to an acquaintance of mine. Who knows? If you catch her fancy, you just might survive. Although from the sound of that 'gurk', I suppose it's too late.>

"Damn... you..."

Who was he speaking to, the girl, or Doubs?

Noticing that the object in his chest was a blade laced with silver, Levillio realized the fact of his impending death.

"The master... the others... where...?"

"Oh, that irritating old man? Well... by now, he's in my tummy! Heeheeheeheeheeheel!"

The girl mocked Levillio as he looked on in despair.

"Dim...guil..."

"Who the hell is that? I don't know anybody's names around here. I ate everyone in this castle."

"...Impossible... How could a girl like you..."

"Like this."

A moment later, Levillio's body disappeared.

In front of the girl was a maw of teeth—the jaws of a wolf. The jaws chewed on the meat that entered, and disappeared into the floor. In the end, only a pink cell phone covered in hearts popped up from the spot.

"I *am* this castle now, you little shit! Hahahahahaha! Hee hee hee! Ahahahahahahaha!"

After a round of laughter, the girl suddenly fell to her knees and muttered to herself, her shoulders trembling.

"...Fuck. These powers are putting some serious strain on my body... Relic might be the only one who can use them without screwing himself over. That mayor just might kick the bucket after five tries."

<You sound particularly pained. Are you all right?>

The phone call still seemed to be in progress. Doubs' voice came out of the speaker.

Loa put on airs and replied,

"Oh, it looks like I haven't spoken to you properly yet. In any case, thank you for your help. Thanks to you, we've finally found a foothold here in Europe."

<'We', you say? I'm impossibly interested to see who else will gather at your side, Miss Loa.>

It was a transparent attempt at fishing out information.

Loa laughed without a care and sternly said her goodbyes with the cutest voice she could muster.

"I don't have a fucking shred of info to piss off to a cock-sucking multi-agent dickbag. If I ever see your bitchy face again, I'll kiss your ass and tear it off with my teeth, so fuck off, you little shit. ♥"

†

The Mars estate.

"She hung up."

<You're one hell of a gent, Doubs.>

"She'll tear off my rear with her teeth, she says. My goodness. Although I do suppose it might not be too bad if she were closer to Laetitia's age."

<And a degenerate sicko, too. Gimme a break here.>

Hackey Mouse's voice continued from the laptop, even after the phone call was ended.

Doubs ignored him and looked out at the courtyard through the window.

There, he saw Ferret mercilessly beating Michael. The officers around them were laughing good-naturedly.

"Michael has already fit right in with the Organization."

<Ah, speakin' of which. Why'd ya bring Michael? I thought y'said you were gonna bring that Theo guy. Feel pretty damned awful for him, by the way. You're the one Melhilm asked to look into Elsa. Then ya go and tell 'im she got killed by humans! ...You plottin' something, Doubs?>

"'The vampire named Elsa died by the love of humans'. That was what I meant when I reported to Melhilm, intending to give my blessings to her new beginning. But I suppose that much poetry was too much for Melhilm. To think he would really take my words at face value..."

Doubs went silent for a moment, falling into thought. Then,

"I don't take too much entertainment from meaningless deaths. The massacre at the village entertained me so little that I decided to give Theo a petite poke. But to think Theo and I shared such a strange connection."

<Ah, right. You're a hedonist, but you ain't a homicidal loon. Sorry, man.>

Doubs chuckled wryly, still keeping his eyes trained on Michael.

"I've told Fannie this already, but... I brought that boy here because I was curious. Just what kind of future will he attain? Of course, Ferret is also a rather special case. She also walks the boundary between humans and vampires. I'm almost starting to want to cheer for them."

<You, cheer on a *relationship*? I sure as hell wasn't expectin' that.>

"I do always say: As long as I am entertained."

There was a tinge of loneliness somewhere in Doubs' stoic response.

"So innocent are the two of them... that I get the feeling that only tragedy awaits their future."

<Michael 'specially. He's the kinda guy who'd die laughin' before he knows how bad he has it.>

"And if the two of them somehow beat the odds, and find happiness... wouldn't it feel rather like winning the lottery?"

"Let us pray. That their future, at least, will be a blessed one."

†

Not knowing that two vampires were evaluating his future, Michael laughed as Ferret punched him.

"Where should we start, Ferret? If we're practicing for married life, I think we should try out matching clothes! And we'll have to get clothes for Alma too, since she's family—"

"Silence! I've told you, this is extremely improper!"

[But Ferret. You, Michael, and Alma are not living alone—there are servants at this manor as well]

"What?! The maids, too?! Don't worry, sir! My heart always belongs to Fe—"

"Please! Learn to *listen* to people when they are speaking!"

Though Ferret lashed out at Michael, on the inside, she was relieved.

Things had returned to the way they always were. But now she found herself truly understanding it.

At the moment, they were not interacting as human and vampire.

She just enjoyed the days she spent, Michael and herself.

Ferret had the nagging suspicion that she had fallen into a sort of trap set up by her father, but she did not mind so much.

The state of their current relationship would not last forever. Ferret knew that well.

And yet she prayed.

That once they came to the point of choosing between the paths of humanity and vampires, they would at least be able to smile just as they did now.

She prayed to herself with all her heart.



Extra Episode B: Humans

Somewhere in Japan. The words of an anthropologist.

And that is the story of the incident that took place not so very long ago.

Ah, yes. I happened to go drinking with a friend of mine from the Organization. That's where I got a hold of this piece of news.

My friend?

His stomach began acting up again after the stress of running away so much. He ended up with an ulcer.

I suppose humans and vampires are no different in that life becomes difficult when you can't lie to yourself.

In any case, now you know that there are all sorts of connections binding humans and vampires, even in the narrow categories of love and hate.

When you add understanding, duty, and fetters to the mix, you end up with a complicated mess of undefined knowledge.

I think you might ask then if relationships between humans are not the same. I think the biggest difference is the time that is granted to the respective species.

Humans being jealous of vampires? That's not even the half of it.

...What is the leading cause of death among vampires, do you think?

Of course, many are killed by humans. But that is only the second cause.

The leading cause of death among vampires... is suicide.

In many cases, they despair at eternity or grow bored and fall into depression.

Because they live on for eternity, they are constantly fighting boredom and the loss of identity.

The longer you live, the less defined your self becomes... and vampires tend to be rather lonely creatures to begin with, you see.

The officers in this story were all rather colorful characters, no? That might perhaps be a defense mechanism for them. To keep a hold on a defined sense of identity. Members of Clans have family to support them and compete with, but the vampires of the Organization tend to be, by nature, alone. Especially those like Dark Grey.

In any case, perhaps that is why vampires so admire humanity.

Just as humans long for eternity, vampires long for the finite.

And they see beauty in humans, whose lives pass by in the blink of an eye.

If you want to dream of a happy end to the relationships between humans and vampires...

Let us, at least, walk with them. Side-by-side.

Believing that our transient light could be carved into their eternity.

-To be continued-

Afterword: To My Dear Readers

It's been a while. This is Narita. It's been three years since I last brought you a new volume of Vamp!.

I was actually planning to release this book in 2006, but things came up and it was pushed back to this point. I sincerely apologize to the readers of Vamp!.

In this book, I've written about half the things I discussed in the previous afterword. I felt the terror of a scheduled short story anthology being transformed entirely by a three-year span of time. I also thought, "It's kind of weird for the first book in three years to be an anthology", and ended up with this.

Now, those of you who were complaining, "The mayor and Pirie and Shizune weren't around at all!", please calm yourselves. The petty villain is scheduled to be the main character of Vamp! V! Although I don't know if the petty mayor has it in him, the next book will be the story of what happened on Growerth during the events of this volume. Those of you who prefer the Growerth-side characters, please look forward to it! The book got so long that I couldn't finish writing about Dorothy and the viscount's past, but I hope I can bring that in somewhere next time.

And from this volume on, a character encyclopedia will be added to Vamp! volumes! It exists to prevent reader(and writer) confusion that stems from the rapidly-increasing character count. In fact, it'll start right after this.

This time, the profiles cover the Organization members—which alone introduced countless new characters. I put my *chūnibyō*⁵ drive into full throttle for this job, but—

"Look! Isn't this completely *chūnibyō*?" I asked, showing a friend the character profiles.

"...I think you have *chūnibyō* confused with something else."

"Wh-what? Then what the heck is *this*?!"

"I could explain in one word that'd never get published. Want to hear it?"

"Sorry, never mind."

So my eyes ended up swimming at the conversation, but even that's nothing but a good memory now.

I've received a great deal of help for this volume as well.

I got ideas about some of the Organization members and some of Romy's swords from other authors. I also received a great deal of advice.

⁵ "Second year middle school syndrome", which usually strikes in the second year of middle school. It involves fantasizing about delusions of grandeur, but people generally grow out of it... eventually.

I'd like to sincerely thank Asai Rabo-san, Oginome Yūki-san, Saegusa Reiichi-san, Sakaki Ichirō-san, Sanda Makoto-san, Tsukiji Toshihiko-san, Hase Satoshi-san, Fujiwara Yū-san, Furuhashi Hideyuki-san, Mikumo Gakuto-san, and many other authors for their advice!

Thank you to my editor Wada-san, the editorial department, and the publishing department, to whom I've again caused a great deal of trouble.

Thank you to my family, friends, and acquaintances.

Thank you to Enami Katsumi-san, who drew many beautiful illustrations in spite of the many new characters, truly making the vampires' night shine.

And thank you to Nasu Kinoko-san(whose works include Kara no Kyōkai, DDD, and the Fate series), who wrote a recommendation for this volume! It was such a Vamp!-ish recommendation that I was beside myself with joy. Heh. I can't marry off Romy like that, but I will make grateful use of your magic sword!

And finally, thank you to you, the readers, who have waited so long for this volume of Vamp!, and readers who recently began the series. Thank you very much!

...So, why'd I get the afterword published horizontally again?⁶

June 2008
Ryohgo Narita

⁶ Novels are usually published entirely in vertical writing in Japan. This afterword, however, was published horizontally.

Vamp! Character Encyclopedia

Gerhardt von Waldstein "The Red Pool of Blood"

The former Lord of Growerth. A liquid gentleman who was once an ordinary vampire, now turned to fluid through a series of experiments. He generates energy through photosynthesis, and will die if deprived of sunlight.

Gerhardt possesses the title of 'viscount', which technically does not exist in Germany. But in any case, he is a gentleman.

Enjoys sunlight.

[One does not become a gentleman overnight. It is most important to strive to act as a gentleman might. And eventually, not only others—but you yourself—will call you a gentleman.]

Relic von Waldstein

Gerhardt's adopted son and the current Lord of Growerth. He is a powerful entity who possesses all sorts of vampire powers and weaknesses, but he is also a gentle soul. Relic has no idea what the job of Lord entails.

He is currently dating his childhood friend Hilda, and is wholeheartedly encouraging the relationship between his own sister and Michael.

Enjoys blood and Baumkuchen.

"I never really thought about this before, but do I get paid for being the Lord of Growerth?"

Ferret von Waldstein

Gerhardt's adopted daughter and Relic's younger twin. She is a hardy girl with no vampire abilities or weaknesses to speak of. But don't say that to her face. Ferret is constantly doing her best to behave like an aristocrat, and hates showing others weakness.

Enjoys *kōhaku suama*, a dish she tried out in Japan.

"Honored Brother, you are a vampire and an aristocrat. You have no reason to think about lowly matters such as finances! What? I-in case of an emergency? ...Should such a thing happen, I-I shall earn the necessary money myself!"

Michael Dietrich

A human. He is Relic and Ferret's childhood friend, and is Ferret's self-proclaimed boyfriend. Put nicely, he is an innocent teenager. In less sensitive terms, he has no sense of caution. But that is also why he has opened up to countless nonhumans residing on Growerth, who also open their heart to him in turn. Michael dreams of one day writing and illustrating children's books.

Enjoys anything he eats with Ferret.

"There's nothing I don't know about Ferret! For example, I know who she likes: Me! Ouch! Why'd you have to hit me, Ferret? I got it right, didn't I?"

Hilda Dietrich

A human. She is Michael's younger sister and Relic's beloved girlfriend. She's waiting for Relic to finally decide whether to turn her or not. She also has an impish side, scolding him for being so indecisive sometimes and enjoying Relic's flustered reactions.

Enjoys *maultaschen suppe*.

"Say, Relic. Could I try drinking your blood sometimes too? ...Hee hee. I was just joking. You're so cute when you make that face, Relic."

Melhilm Herzog "The Violet Sage"

A sworn friend of Gerhardt. Melhilm is a researcher who often creates new kinds of vampires. He was traumatized by the experience of having been partially eaten by Shizune Kijima. His nickname is a creation of Ishibashi, but Melhilm has no idea that it's actually a pun when written in Japanese⁷. If he knew, he would be angry. Very much so.

Enjoys blood.

"Vampires are, in fact, perfectly suited to the task of research. After all, we have an infinite supply of the resource known as time."

Caldimir Aleksandrov "The Blue Flow of Blood"

A vampire of Russian descent. He is a third-rate actor reject who sees Gerhardt as a rival. He is a formidable foe in one-on-one battles, but he is weak against multiple enemies. He is also weak against his younger sister Nastasha. A man with a sister complex.

He enjoys caviar, but that's really just a show of vanity. He can't distinguish it from cheap salmon roe.

"I merely wish to demonstrate that we vampires are superior to humans."

Laetitia G. Aztanduja "The Orange Magic Lantern"

A female vampire who enjoys dressing in military uniforms. She is a villainous woman who likes watching other people's suffering from up close. Laetitia cannot resist sweets, and for some reason, she suffers from chronic dental cavities. Her hobbies include adopting humans as her children. She had dozens of adopted sons and daughters all over the world.

Enjoys gum syrup.

"You mean you want to demonstrate that you're the superior one, Caldimir."

Nastasha Aleksandrov "The Nachtkobold"

A Russian vampire who believes that she only became an officer thanks to her older brother's influence. Though everyone values her for being much more capable than Caldimir, she alone believes herself unworthy of her position. She seems to be on the same wavelength as Grey, constantly repeating the mutual exchange of "N-not at all! You are a wonderful officer!"x2.

⁷ In Japanese, Melhilm's moniker is pronounced "Murasaki Shikisha", a reference to Murasaki Shikibu.

Enjoys vodka. For some reason, she never gets drunk.

"M-my brother's causing everyone trouble again... I'm so sorry!"

Zygmunt Kiparis "The Green Army"

A loyal follower of Caldimir who possesses the terrifying power to subjugate humans through airborne infection. Although her main body has the form of a human woman, she is actually a plant-based vampire. Of the humans under her subjugation, the twelve most powerful are known as Branches, and the weaker remainder are known as Leaves.

"I am being manipulated by Comrade Caldimir, you say? That does not bother me in the least. After all, to propagate by being devoured is also a way of life for us plants."

Aiji Ishibashi "The I(ndigo)-Shadow"

A member of the Organization's moderate faction who prioritizes peace. He is Yellow's older brother, and possesses the strange power to manipulate shadows. In his head, he calls it "*Ninpō*: Shadow Play", but he's too embarrassed to say it out loud. He has a soft spot for puns, as is clear from his moniker. He has a wide range of other abilities as well, including turning his body into acid.

Enjoys California rolls.

"After a long time in Japan, one can sometimes be attracted to the blood of a blonde beauty."

Yellow Bridgestone "The Yellow Bullets of Joy"

A belligerent officer who is enthusiastic about trying new things. He is Aiji's younger brother, and possesses the ability to turn parts of himself into bat bullets and firing them out of a gun. He can even turn his entire body into one gigantic bat projectile and launch it in the direction of his choosing. Although he's a flippant man, he also has a romantic side, flirting with women he's met for the first time.

Enjoys Teriyaki burgers.

"You don't know how good you have it, big brother. You got any idea how bad I wanna give a Japanese babe a kiss on the neck?"

Dorothy Nifas "Snow White"

Gerhardt's fiancée. She is capable of using telekinesis to slow down the movements of molecules, which she uses to sap heat from her target. The more excited she is, the colder the air around her becomes. That is why the viscount freezes immediately upon contact with her. But Dorothy and Gerhardt are nonetheless passionately in love with each other. The burning flames of love, however, are not enough to melt the frozen viscount.

Enjoys apples.

"'I wish to partake in a love that freezes my very blood', Gerhardt said as he tried to kiss me. ...But he turned to ice almost instantly."

Garde Ritzberg "The Black Gravekeeper"

Gerhardt's party member on a certain MMORPG. They possess formidable subjugation abilities, controlling everything from dead fish to their own cells. They seem to have no clear sense of morality. Because they are constantly wrapped in bandages, it is impossible to tell if they are a man or a woman.

Enjoys nothing in particular.

"Does the way I talk bother you? Does it super-duper-bother you? ...Forget."

Rude Gardastance "The Gold Yaksha"

A former executive of a powerful American corporation. Now, he has left the company in the hands of his relatives, prioritizing his social life as a vampire and hopping back and forth between high society and the Organization. He is a money-grubber, but not a very stingy person. He once bought an entire subway line as an excuse to avoid sunlight.

Likes gold leaf.

"What do I fear? Too many things. Communism, inflation, deflation, and war bond levies, just to name a few."

Romy Mars "The Silver-wheel Stage"

The head of the Mars family and an elderly little girl who is several hundred years old. She is a hardcore gamer and a cosplayer. She wields thousands upon thousands of weapons, but it's such a hassle to keep them all in tip-top shape that she has almost a hundred blacksmiths in her employ to do the work for her. Whenever she has to leave for a distant place, hordes of butlers and maids follow after her with all her 'toys'.

Her weapons are all named after video games from every era and country, from Famicom titles to modern PC games. She tends to avoid non-electronic games.

Enjoys the sugar she ingests before diving into a game.

"My favorite game? Let's see... I was honestly floored about fifty years ago when they made a game using an oscilloscope! To think you could create a new world within a two-dimensional space—(Five hours of discussion omitted.)"

Doubs Hewley "The Iridescent Extra"

As his moniker makes clear, Doubs is a magician appearing to be in his twenties who wears an iridescent costume. He is an entertainer who loves extravagance, devoting his very life to fill the lives of vampires with entertainment. He always shows up when the Organization's officers are bored. He sets up all sorts of shocking events, such as the Stress-Busting Human Hunt (where it turned out all the humans were master Hunters), the Vampire Fight Club, the Spontaneous Tour of a Dangerous Werewolf Village, and the Midnight Cathedral Visit.

Likes popcorn.

"Merry April Fool's! Trick or Lie!"

Fannie Lou "The Light Green Usurper"

A strange vampire who metamorphosed from a spider to take on human form. He looks and thinks like a child, and loves little girls around his own age. He ties them up with spiderwebs and tries to do stuff like dressing them up in his preferred styles or sucking their blood, but he loves little girls so much that whenever they ask him to release them, he complies.

Ultimately, he's never been able to fulfill any of his fantasies. If a girl happens to call him a monster, he bursts into tears and becomes depressed, again becoming unable to do as he likes.

Likes moths and butterflies.

*"So... um... okay. I'll let you go. *sigh*..."*

Satō Ichirō "The Grey Sasanqua"

A nondescript man. He does his work as an officer with plain mediocrity, and occasionally gets the urge to suck human blood like everyone else but is too fearful to go beyond what is necessary. He is always the one who makes the safest, plainest suggestions. But because the Organization is full of all kinds of outlandish characters, his unremarkable suggestions are actually quite useful. The other members of the Organization value him for this.

His moniker comes from an incident when Gardastance once asked him, "I've heard about a memorization system in the East that makes it easy to learn the times tables. Would you teach me?". But he was so panicked that he ended up blurting out, "G-Gar—s-s-s-san... qu... question...?!". Ishibashi happened to overhear the conversation and came up with the nickname "The Grey Sasanqua".

Likes digestive medicine.

"M-my stomach...!"

Morikawa Ichinomori "The Vermillion Prayer"

A vampire who also serves as a Shinto priest, with countless *miko* vampires under his command. An opportunist who draws lots to determine the day's fortunes. The freeloaders at Waldstein Castle envy him immensely for being surrounded by many beautiful ladies, but he has no interest in women. Or men, for that matter. He claims, "My entire being has been consecrated to over eight million *kami*, and no one else", and that he feels lust for *kami* only. In many ways, he has no right to be a Shinto priest.

Enjoys brown rice.

"In this land, it is said that kami dwell in all things. Is it not, ahem... exciting... to think that kami are constantly watching over us? ...No? ...Ahem..."

Key Dorrikey "The Inviter of Fresh Corpses"

A self-proclaimed 'Great Detective'. His M.O. consists of biting and subjugating everyone connected to a given crime and forcing out a confession. His trail of successes has elevated him to stardom... Or so he thinks. The police are wary of the fact that he catches criminals without doing any detective work, and are starting to suspect that he is, in fact, the mastermind behind all of the crimes.

Enjoys smoking out of a pipe.

Watson

Key's assistant. A quiet, attractive werewolf around middle-school age, Watson's constant hunger pangs mean that there is always someone on the scene who can out-creepy the actual culprit.

Key: *"Heh heh heh... The culprit is not among us! That is because the motive for this crime was theft. Hmph... I'd have bagged this case by now if I'd subjugated everyone instead of taking the time to observe and investigate, Wat- Wait! Stop, Watson! The crime may be over, but that's no excuse for chewing on the victim's family—"*

George "The Deep Deep Deep Blue"

A megalodon(an ancient species of shark that should have gone extinct in the distant past) vampire. He has three thresher shark familiars. Although it's doubtful if he can really communicate with people, telepathic vampires are apparently able to speak with him. He has a playful side, sometimes fooling around by putting sea turtles on his head.

Enjoys eating sea turtles.

"..."

Hawking "The Nothing-But-Present Void"

Vamp!'s go-to character for power level inflation prevention. A black hole creature... Or rather, an actual black hole. A black hole with a sense of self that had been compiled by intense density. He emits mysterious signals from his body(?) and uses the power of his soul to convert them to messages that ignore travel time and sends them to Earth. But it seems that only vampires and certain humans are capable of communicating with him. He has studied the mentality of Earthlings and tries to speak in accordance with what he has learned. Because he is a black hole, he obviously cannot move from where he is. "Know the taste of defeat... Come closer", he could say. But no one can approach him, so he is thus far undefeated. And even if anyone did approach him, they would be flattened in an instant. In other words, he is the strongest. But all he can to do Earth is talk and watch. How he receives visual information is one of the Seven Mysteries of Vampirekind.

Likes light.

"Say... Do you think white holes really exist?"

-Continued in Volume V-